REVOLUTIONARY ROAD:
INDO-PACIFIC IN TRANSITION

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THE Indo-Pacific. Rarely has any geographical term that burst into collective imagination carried as much political import as this one. Notwithstanding the lack of a common definition of the 'Indo-Pacific,' it has shaped strategic discourse over the past year unlike any other notion in the recent past. The new United States National Security Strategy (NSS) spoke of its importance, followed by the US national defence strategy that formally enlisted the term in Pentagon-speak. When Canberra published a new foreign policy white paper after many years, it too spoke of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific for Australian grand strategy. Closer to home, too, the term is agitating the strategic space.

Disruption, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is the act of interrupting flow and continuity or – somewhat differently – bringing disorder. This definition naturally begets questions. Interrupting or bringing disorder to what? How? Why? And, by who? If the Indo-Pacific is, as this essay argues, a theatre of disruption, the onus is on the claimants to answer these questions with some clarity. Of these, the 'who' question is perhaps the simplest to answer.

It is concern around a potential power transition in Asia due to the (re)emergence of China as a great power that motivates much (though not all) of the debate about the need to view the Indian and Pacific Oceans as an integrated geostrategic entity.

The latest US NSS labelled the People's Republic – along with Russia – "revisionist." It also spoke of "great power rivalry" as the principal national security challenge to the US. It therefore comes as no surprise that the birth of a new geopolitical term is coincident with a re-emergence of great power politics. If geopolitics, the interplay of space and power, is back it is because Chinese power stands to upend the US-policed open order from the Horn of Africa to the western Pacific – i.e., across the entire Indo-Pacific region.

But when one talks of the Indo-Pacific as a normative strategic construct, it is also a reflection of an anti-disruption in the region: to bring together what had been 'separated forcibly' (the third dictionary definition of disruption). In other words, the normative construct of the 'Indo-Pacific' can be viewed in itself as a response to disruptive Chinese actions in the geographical Indo-Pacific. The principal challenge for open societies in the region will be to give concrete form to the former to manage the latter.

Taking a long view, this essay argues that disruptions in the Indo-Pacific can be traced to three deeply interrelated factors: the assertion of history, the realisation of geography, and the weaponisation of economics.

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The assertion of history

The first source of disruption in the Indo-Pacific is growing and noisy historical consciousness among rising powers in the region. Narratives based on history – both real as well as mythical – fuel nationalism, enforce existing territorial claims, and form the basis for newer ones. These, in turn, have put considerable strain on the existing order in the region. But assertion of privileged history is not unique to rising powers alone. Indeed, traditional powers in the region have, in the recent past, also asserted their historical positions. In their case, they have done so by adopting a longer view, albeit one that remains relatively circumscribed by more recent memory and outreach, that substantiates their hegemonic positions and historical aspirations and, inter alia, attempts to counter the historical narratives of the challengers. Three Indo-Pacific countries best exemplify this complicated relationship with history and the dynamic of assertion and counter-assertion: China, India, and the US.

When Xi Jinping assumed office as the head of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on November 29, 2012, he accompanied the new Politburo Standing Committee to the national museum in Beijing and, once there, to the prominent permanent display titled ‘The Road to Rejuvenation.’ This display sharply contrasts the tribulations of the Chinese ‘Century of Humiliation’ (roughly 1840 to 1949) with the prosperity of the People’s Republic since its founding.[1] At the end of Xi’s museum visit, he spoke of the “China Dream” for the first time, of “the great renewal of the Chinese nation.”[2]

Xi’s call was far from being ceremonial tokenism. Under Xi, nationalism in China is on an upsurge, carefully stage-managed by the CPC through officially approved social media and driven by a cultural campaign that seeks to bridge the great legacies of imperial China with that of the 21st century People’s Republic into one seamless whole. And, as Howard French notes in his recent book, under Xi China’s past shapes its pursuit of a global role which, in the minds of Chinese nationalists, is simply restoring China’s historical place in the imperial scheme of things – in “everything under the heavens.”[3]

This assertion of China’s rightful place in tian xia – which French interprets to mean “nearby Central Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia”[4] – has had practical consequences for the regional order. They have included China advancing territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, a muscular approach towards Japan and Vietnam, as well as promoting and financing a mega-connectivity initiative that seeks to restore the old land and maritime Silk Roads. When China decided to set aside the UNCLOS arbitration verdict against it in July 2016 – which in effect questioned the legality of China’s “nine-dash line” in the South China Sea[5] – it was a demonstration to the extent to which Beijing is willing to go to preserve its “historical rights.” It is the legitimising narrative of these rights that has allowed China to build artificial islands and features in the South China Sea. Militarisation of these islands consolidates China’s anti-access/area denial strategy. It has also used historical claims to justify the imposition of an air-defence identification zone over the Japan-controlled Senkakus in 2013. Finally, historical narrative-building forms a key component of China’s “Three Warfares Strategy”[6] in that it buttresses Chinese law-fare campaigns. (Later sections will discuss China’s Belt-Road Initiative, which is again framed around imperial Chinese history.)

But China is hardly the only country that is beginning to assert its historical place in the world. Since independence, Indian political elite too have pursued the quest for restoring India’s place in the world. Notably, India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru – acutely conscious of the exceedingly limited base of the young republic’s material strength – pursued a strategy of moral-politik to lift India’s global profile and punch above its weight in the international system. As India has become stronger, so has its collective historical consciousness. Nothing illustrates this better than the public mood following the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014.

Modi’s foreign policy – more often than not – has explicitly furthered India’s soft power through tropes around Indian legacy. The much-celebrated International Day of Yoga is a case in point. In order to compete with China’s proposal to revive the Silk Route, the Modi government has resuscitated the idea of a Spice Route through the Indian Ocean.[7] Books written by thinkers close to the current Indian dispensation have drawn attention to India’s vast maritime heritage,[8] while prominent Indian strategists remind foreign audiences in closed-door meetings that the war memorial of India Gate in New Delhi also commemorates colonial Indian participation in the Afghan Wars of the 19th century – a sign that, historically, India has been far from being aloof in great power politics. But it is important to note that contemporary India’s historical assertions have been, at once, benign and reactive. This may be a function of India’s still-limited power: China can put its money where its mouth is; India still has a long way to go before it can do so.

The US historically had a complicated relationship with Asia during the Cold War. When it was indeed forced to spend blood and treasure in the continent, it was with the desire to preserve the global balance of power by keeping communism at bay. The prevalent doctrine of ‘linkages’ meant that Cold War America concerned itself with Asia, both East and West, with the objective of maintaining status quo in continental Europe. (As Bruno Maçães writes in his new book, “The Cold War can be understood as a conflict between Europe and Asia, subtly covered up by the ideologies of capitalism and communism.”[9]) For example, the US policy towards Japan was as much about preventing it from re-militarising as it was about preventing Japan from falling into the communist orbit.[10] The two great – and dismal – American Cold War adventures in Asia, the Korean War and the intervention in Vietnam, were again contests between American and communist powers.

East Asia – specifically and in its own right – once again came to the fore in American official consciousness when then-president Barack Obama, speaking at the Australian parliament in 2011, reaffirmed the US as a Pacific power, noting “we are here to stay.”[11] Marking the beginning of a “pivot to Asia,” this was the recognition of the importance of Asia divorced from the vagaries of trans-Atlantic politics, the Cold War being long over and the economic centre of gravity continuing to shift eastward. Obama’s pivot was post-ideological. It was indifferent to the fact that China was – and remains – communist. For American strategists a rebalance became necessary not because of the regime type in Beijing, but because China and the US increasingly found themselves in a zero-sum game in Asia, exacerbated by the apparently positive-sum logic of trade. In Obama’s pivot there was more than a hint of the historical legacy of Theodore Roosevelt, who oversaw a massive consolidation of US power in the Pacific (including acquisition of Hawaii in 1898) – and who once noted “I wish to see the United States the dominant power on the shores of the Pacific.”[12]

The realisation of geography

As former NATO commander James Stavridis notes in his new book, Roosevelt, in his vision for the US as a Pacific power, was significantly influenced by American navalist Alfred Thayer Mahan.[13] Mahan's influence – and his theory of why countries become naval powers – also looms large over contemporary Chinese and Indian strategists. As an example: an *Economist* story on the 2009 Shangri-La Dialogue, pseudonymously filed by 'Banyan,' noted that "whenever Banyan prodded a military man from India or China, out leapt a Mahanite."[14] However, this is not to say that Chinese or Indian naval strategists take Mahan's theories on the mechanics of naval power literally. Rather they – as contemporary American navalist James Holmes puts it – ascribe to the Mahanian logic of seapower that would make navies put premium on "commercial, political, and military access to important theaters."[15]

Nothing illustrates this better than China's dogged pursuit to control the South China Sea (SCS), arguably the most dangerous flashpoint in the entire Indo-Pacific region. The SCS is to China, American strategist Robert Kaplan argues, what the Greater Caribbean – the region stretching from Florida to Venezuela along with the Gulf of Mexico – is to the US.[16] The implication here, of course, is that just as the US sought to veto the influence of external powers in the Greater Caribbean through the Monroe Doctrine, China too will adopt a similar doctrine for the SCS. Kaplan pursues the analogy by noting: "The key geographical fact about the Caribbean is that it is close to America but was far from the great European powers of the age, just as the South China Sea is close to China but far from America and other western powers."[17] For the Chinese, the SCS is of obvious importance. Analyst Mingjiang Li notes how the SCS is a "natural shield" for China's densely populated and most-developed southern parts.[18] Having a "strong foothold" in the SCS – which essentially connects western Indian Ocean to Northeast Asia – would, Li argues, act as a "restraining factor" for the US navy.[19]

The problem with this idea is that the SCS is similarly important for other regional powers, such as India, Japan, and the US, who would not let the People's Republic pursue a naval strategy remotely close to resembling the one the US pursued in the 19th century to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. Herein lies the tragedy of great power politics which is, at its core, a "battle of space and power" (to juxtapose a phrase of Kaplan's with the title of John Mearsheimer's magnum opus). To wit, natural geographical compulsions led the US to pursue hegemonic control over the Greater Caribbean; similar compulsions will also drive the Chinese to exert themselves in the SCS. As Mearsheimer – comparing Chinese behaviour to that of the US – once asked: "Why should we expect the Chinese to act any differently than the US did? Are they more principled that we are? More ethical? Less nationalistic?"[20] Pushing this argument further: as Indian naval capabilities grow, what stands in the way of India to also seek exclusivist control in the Indian Ocean in a similar fashion, especially given that India has never quite warmed up to the presence of what it calls "extra-regional powers" in that maritime space? This raises the possibility of an extremely high-stakes maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific as regional naval capabilities there increase.[21]

But it not just heightened awareness of maritime geography by Indo-Pacific states that stand to act as a disruptor. Intra-state geography as well as land borders play equally important roles. Kaplan's recent travelogue is as much a meditation on how geographical differences within the continental US have largely shaped that country's schizophrenic relationship with globalisation – the denouement of which was the election of Donald Trump in 2016 – as it is about how American geography shaped US foreign policy. As he writes: "Alas, geopolitics – the battle of space and power – now occurs within states as well as between them. Cultural and religious differences are particularly inflamed, for as group differences melt in the crucible of globalization, they have to be reinvented in more blunt and ideological form by, as it turns out, the communications revolution."[22] If the US is a counter-example to the claim that globalisation homogenises – "flattens," to use a Thomas Friedman image – an entire continent, then so is the India-China dynamic in the Eurasian rimland. Until about 2016, when serious fissures started to show up in that relationship, a large section of Indian strategists had assumed that as trade and investment flows between the two countries deepen, the issue of the unsettled India-China 4,057 kilometre border can be set aside and eventually made irrelevant to the relationship. The Doklam standoff last year – the worse such showdown between the Indian and Chinese military in over three decades – has made it clear that borders matter, disputed ones more so. It illustrates that no amount of economic intercourse between any two countries can paper over the hard push-and-pull of geopolitics.

Widely seen as a major disruption to the rules-of-the-game for trade, finance, and connectivity initiatives, the Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) also illustrates how uneven economic development within a country – itself a function of that country's geography – can lead it to connect with the wider world in specific ways. Like the US, China as a continental power too has seen uneven economic development – exacerbated by hyper-globalisation – across its breadth. While coastal China has grown to become extraordinarily prosperous, living standards in the hinterlands continue to be poor. No other Chinese province illustrates this better than Xinjiang, a restive land-locked part of the mainland that has all the attributes of West Asian badlands. Improving the socio-economic reality of Xinjiang remains a key priority of the Chinese leadership given the latent potential of an Islamist insurgency there. The BRI, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is one way through which the CPC seeks to integrate Xinjiang with the rest of the Chinese economy. Indeed, one of the stated goals of the BRI is for it to contribute to China's national development objectives, which include "Develop the West" (presumably referring to Xinjiang and other western Chinese provinces).[23]

The weaponisation of economics

BRI also serves as an example of the third key disruptor to the extant Indo-Pacific order: China's increasing use of economics as an instrument of geopolitical statecraft. Even without the BRI in Beijing's toolkit, Chinese geoeconomics has targeted Southeast Asian states through directed aid to achieve political objectives and/or "register maximum geopolitical returns for Beijing."[24] Blackwill and Harris note that China has targeted Indonesia and Malaysia the most with its economic statecraft given that "[n]either is among Beijing's outspoken skeptics in the region, nor its most reliable supporters."[25] Xi Jinping also unveiled the BRI in a visit to Indonesia in 2013, an illustration of the importance of that country for the initiative. One of the goals of the BRI, skeptics suspect, is inducing economic dependency on the target state to the point that China shapes its foreign policy choices. Indian strategist Brahma Chellaney has termed this Chinese modus operandi as "debt-trap diplomacy." Through the BRI, Chellaney writes, "countries are becoming ensnared in a debt trap that leaves them vulnerable to China's influence."[26]

BRI – modelled after the millennia-old Silk Roads, according to its evangelists – is also a good example of how China moulds history to fit its purposes. For example, some economic historians have argued that the economic importance of the ancient Silk Roads has been overstated. Instead, the real value of these routes was in "cultural and religious exchanges."[27] The BRI as a geostrategic project is also significant given that it strives to unify two hyphenated geopolitical theatres: the Mackinderian Eurasia (as part of the land 'Belt') and the Mahanian Indo-Pacific (as part of the maritime 'Road'). By selectively inducing dependencies in both theatres, BRI gives form to the nascent Chinese grand strategy of achieving global political parity with the US. Parenthetically, the very fact that BRI integrates the Eurasian and Indo-Pacific battlespaces is why the Gwadar port in Pakistan (as part of CPEC) is important. It is – as former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran has noted – one of the places where the Belt meets the Road.[28]

Whatever be the grand strategic design of the BRI, the fact that it is a potent tool of Chinese economic statecraft is already becoming visible in small Indo-Pacific countries. Sri Lanka is a case in point. By loaning it money to develop the commercially unviable port at Hambantota, Beijing ensured that the control of that strategically important facility would eventually fall in Chinese hands. This is precisely what happened in December last year, when Sri Lanka officially handed over control of the port to China on a 99-year lease.[29] Even in Pakistan – a country which considers China its closest ally and its "all-weather friend" – pointed questions are being asked about the long-term implications of Chinese infrastructure loans, and their commercial sustainability and socio-economic desirability.[30] Furthermore, China is more than happy to enter into commercial agreements with countries, even as details of these deals remain opaque to concerned citizens. The recent China-Maldives free-trade agreement (FTA) – that was apparently passed through Maldives' parliament after an hour's discussion – is a case in point. There is a glaring disconnect between public Chinese position on the BRI, which states that the initiative shall be based on the "five principles of mutual coexistence" and how BRI projects, such as the development of the Hambantota

port, are unfolding on the ground,[31] fuelling suspicion about the larger (political) intent behind the initiative.

When India formally refused to send any official delegation for the BRI summit in Beijing in May 2017, the implicit reason behind such a stance was that BRI is fundamentally an instrument of statecraft.[32] While such a stance is welcome – and as such has been echoed by others, including the US secretary of state Rex Tillerson – the deeper issue is that the investment and trade demand and volume in the Indo-Pacific region have not been not matched by commensurate regimes that ensure that commerce is carried out *qua* commerce, with a high degree of transparency and economic rationale. Indeed, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was supposed to have been the economic leg of Obama's Asia pivot. He had claimed that the TPP "makes sure we [the United States] write the rules of the road for trade in the 21st century."[33] Unfortunately it became clear even before Trump's election that the TPP would have been stillborn. Absent an alternative framework for sustainable, transparent trade and investment acceptable to all in the region, Chinese economic statecraft will continue to be a major disruptor of the regional order.

Coda: Putting India in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has been disrupted, this essay has argued, in three different yet related ways: large states in the region have rediscovered history – or, in certain cases, imagined it – to consolidate their geographical, and therefore geopolitical positions. In China's case, this in turn has given way to a grand strategy that sees economics and statecraft as two sides of the same coin. India cannot – and indeed, should not – remain unaffected by these fundamental shifts. If these disruptions lead to the emergence of a Sino-centric order in Asia, India's strategic space will be vastly diminished. Along with China, and often side-by-side, India has argued for a multipolar world. Now that political multipolarity is a reality, it must champion the cause of a multipolar Asia. Making concrete the normative 'Indo-Pacific,' the anti-disruption, ought to be the key Indian tool to do so.

There are essentially four different ways through which that happen.

First, along with developed economies in the region, such as Japan, India should provide connectivity alternatives to smaller Indo-Pacific states. The fructification of the India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) must be a key priority. Triangular development cooperation – where India and a developed economy partner together for development efforts in a third country – will also go a long way in assuaging smaller states across the Indo-Pacific that there are indeed alternatives to the Chinese model. If Indian participation in co-creating the hardware of connectivity (such as the AAGC) is one facet, the other should be Indian stakeholdership in newer forms of policy connectivity, such as FTAs. Traditionally, India's position in multilateral trading architectures has been obstructionist in its self-assigned role as the leader of the G77. By viewing economic regimes as geostrategic assets, India should also facilitate trade and investment across the region.

Second, India must realise that for the Indo-Pacific construct to have any real teeth, there must be a strong political-military component to it. Whether that is through bilateral defence agreements or flexible plurilateral mechanisms, India must realise that a multipolar Asia can only be sustained if external balancing is a key component of Indian grand strategy. As India strives to complete its nation-building at home, it is improbable that internal balancing of China will be enough to maintain the status quo. A renewed focus on external balancing will also imply shedding the Indian military's 'lone-ranger' attitude, often justified as a consequence of India's quest for strategic autonomy. A further corollary is the need for India to have a more expansive view of the Indo-Pacific, and flexibility to accommodate the interests of partners, such as the US and Japan, in the western Pacific, including in the South China Sea. An India in the Indo-Pacific also ought to mean an India in the Pacific.

Third, defence and economic efforts must also be matched by narrative-building around openness and inclusiveness. India must aggressively continue to highlight cultural, ethnic, and religious strands that tie the modern Indian state with Southeast and East Asia. But rhetoric alone will hardly suffice. Indian defence planners continue to make a distinction between resident and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean region. This attitude has to give way to a new modus vivendi where India makes no permanent distinction between the two, and instead replaces this binary with one which emphasises a greater role for powers that promote openness versus revisionist powers that have the potential to undermine it. India-centred networks of the former should develop common and inclusive understanding of freedom of navigation and overflight, and promote norms around them to match the challenges from the latter.

Fourth and final, Indian efforts to convince Indo-Pacific littorals of the need to stand up to Chinese assertiveness, economic or military, will come to naught if India does not do so itself. One of the lessons from the Doklam standoff was that the Indian position to draw a redline – and demonstrate that it was willing to uphold it using all means available – was that smaller Asian states now realise that it is indeed possible for Asian countries to stand firm in face of Chinese push. But beyond this, the modern Indian model – of a syncretic, liberal, democratic republic – must sustain itself. This necessarily means realising that expedient domestic politics based on old dogma – economic or social – may work at cross-purposes with Indian foreign policy goals. Put differently, India must be open within itself as it seeks to promote openness across the region. For example, India can hardly credibly complain about the Chinese way of doing business – subsidised indirectly or directly by the state – if it does not eschew protectionism. India needs to succeed at home for the normative Indo-Pacific to be credible in the world.

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