Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, together with China's economic and military rise, has underpinned the growing strategic significance of the region, and has thrown up both challenges and opportunities for countries in the region. The defining aspect of this unfolding geo-strategic scenario is the effort of the United States to maintain its pre-eminence in the region. The departure of the administration of US President Barack Obama's administration and the arrival of President Donald Trump's witnessed some obfuscation of US foreign policy. Initially, Trump followed a policy of "America First" and tried to withdraw from many US international commitments. But its engagement in the Asia-Pacific has not only remained intact, it has received further attention.

China's posturing to challenge US supremacy in the region has added salience to the evolving security scenario. India, yet another rising power, is playing a catalytic role in this evolving scenario.

India is engaged in a complex balancing act as countries such as the US and Japan make the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific centerpieces of their foreign policy in the region. New Delhi is understandably eager to forge closer links to fellow democracies in Asia, without triggering Chinese worries about containment aimed at Beijing. But it is also eyeing with growing concern China's increasing involvement in its traditional neighborhood in the Indian Ocean, writes Rup Narayan Das.

The "INDO-PACIFIC" is essentially a geo-strategic construct, rather than a geographical entity, that is of recent coinage. It is understood to mean confluence and seamless connectivity between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in his address to members of the Indian Parliament on Aug. 22, 2007, on the "Confluence of the Two Seas" articulated the verticals of the concept when he said, "The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity. A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability — and the responsibility — to ensure that it broadens yet further and nurtures and enriches these seas of clearest transparency."

The tectonic shift of the geo-economy from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, together with China's economic and military rise, has underpinned the growing strategic significance of the region, and has thrown up both challenges and opportunities for countries in the region. The defining aspect of this unfolding geo-strategic scenario is the effort of the United States to maintain its pre-eminence in the region. The departure of the administration of US President Barack Obama's administration and the arrival of President Donald Trump's witnessed some obfuscation of US foreign policy. Initially, Trump followed a policy of "America First" and tried to withdraw from many US international commitments. But its engagement in the Asia-Pacific has not only remained intact, it has received further attention.

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equilibrium. Although India’s engagement with the Asia-Pacific has its own imperatives, developments in the region have cast some resonance on the emerging security paradigm. India’s foray into the South China Sea in October 2011, when its state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission Videsh Ltd signed an agreement with PetroVietnam Oil Corporation to explore in the disputed South China Sea gave a further twist to India’s “Act East” policy. What has added salience to the evolving strategic scenario is the nudging of the US to mentor India in this endeavor as a hedge against China. It is against this backdrop that India is trying to calibrate its engagement with a degree of circumspection and finesse, in deference to Chinese sensitivities.

The call to engage India in the Asia-Pacific was renewed by the US when Obama visited India in November 2010. Addressing members of parliament, a rare honor extended to very select heads of state, Obama said:

...more broadly, India and the United States can partner in Asia. Today the United States is once again playing a leadership role in Asia — strengthening old alliances; deepening relationships, as we are doing with China; and we are re-engaging with regional organizations like ASEAN and joining the East Asia Summit, organizations in which India is also a partner. Like your neighbors in Southeast Asia, we want India not only to ‘Look East,’ we want India to ‘Engage East,’ because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations.

There was some uncertainty about the so-called “Pivot to Asia” policy initiated by Obama and US engagement with India after Trump assumed the presidency. Subsequent developments, however, have brought about a lot of clarity and direction with regard to US engagement in the region and India’s role in it. The joint press statement issued by India and the US during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US in September 2017 reiterated the resolve of the two countries to continue their engagement. Much to the chagrin of China, Trump and Modi again endorsed the importance of respecting freedom of navigation, overflight and commerce throughout the region and called on all the nations to resolve territorial and maritime disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law. The reference to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and India’s reservations about joining the massive Beijing-led infrastructure project was explicit in the statement. The statement also mentioned regional connectivity through transparent development of infrastructure and the use of responsible debt financing, while ensuring respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, the rule of law and the environment. This was a clear vindication of India’s position. Also, the US National Security Strategy, unveiled in December last year, recognized India as a leading global power, reiterating the Trump administration’s commitment to deepen its strategic partnership and support for India’s leadership role in maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific.

The renaming of the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command prior to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018, was yet another strategic gesture by the US to co-opt India in the Asia-Pacific against the backdrop of China’s increasingly assertive behavior. The name change was seen by observers as a tactical move against Chinese attempts at military and economic hegemony in the region, and although it was symbolic, the message was loud and clear. In pursuit of the US objective to reach out to the Indo-Pacific in the emerging security dynamics, Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) into law on Dec. 31, 2018, eight months after it was introduced. The act calls for increased US engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. It is being seen as a measure to reassure allies and partners of US commitments. With a budget of US$1.5 billion over five years, ARIA is meant to “enhance economic, diplomatic and security co-operation with the strategic regional allies and to countering efforts” by China to build its strategic influence in the region. At the same time, it calls on China to play a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific. The act recognizes the vital role of the Strategic Partnership between the US and India in promoting peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and calls for strengthening and broadening diplomatic, economic and security ties between Washington and New Delhi. It also reaffirms US commitment to the “New Framework” for defense relations between the two countries.

There is a significant convergence of approach and interest between India and the US with regard to the Indo-Pacific in the context of China’s assertive behavior. As far back as 2010-11, the annual report of India’s Ministry of Defence noted that “India is conscious and watchful of the implications of China’s evolving military profile in the immediate and extended neighborhood. India’s policy is to engage with China on the principles of mutual trust and respect and sensitivity for each other’s concerns.” China’s forays into the Indian Ocean such as construction of Hamantota port in Sri Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan, Chittagong port in Bangladesh and the satellite monitoring facility at Coco Island in Myanmar are matters of security concern to India. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to connect China to vast portions of the region and beyond through maritime and overland corridors, has further exacerbated India’s security concerns.

New Delhi’s nuanced approach to the South China Sea and its relations with Vietnam was reiterated by Modi when he addressed the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. Alluding to the South China Sea, the prime minister said, “To the east, the Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect...
India to the Pacific and to most of our major partners — ASEAN, Japan, the Republic of Korea, China and the Americas. Our trade in the region is growing rapidly.3 Reiterating to China, he said, “No other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China. Our co-operation is expanding. Trade is growing. And, we have displayed maturity and wisdom in managing issues and ensuring a peaceful border.” The underlying message is very clear: that India has neither the capability nor the inclination to contain China. Modi was very direct when he said, “India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country.”3

It is against this backdrop that the convergence of mutual interests among the US, Japan and India are playing out. This explains the US-Japan-India triad. It is also in this context that the growing defense and security co-operation between India, the US and Japan have acquired traction. In September 2018, the India-US defense relationship received a major boost at the 2+2 Dialogue in New Delhi, where the “Foundational” Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed between the two sides, as well as two other important agreements. COMCASA will enable the Indian military to get a better picture of the Indian Ocean Region, which is seeing increasing Chinese activity. Apart from this defense agreement, both sides in a joint statement said that they had discussed advancing “a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific” and promoting sustainable debt financing in the region.

Another aspect of India’s approach has been its outreach in the maritime domain in response to China’s forays into the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea. Since 1992, India has been holding the annual Malabar naval exercises with the US. Japan joined the exercises in 2007, which have alternated between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The exercises are a demonstration of the joint commitment of the US, Japan and India to addressing common maritime challenges aimed at enhancing maritime security for the benefit of the global maritime community. The Malabar exercises have steadily grown in scope and complexity into a multifaceted effort, with the objective of increased interoperability among the three navies and the development of common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations. China has been watchful and critical of the naval exercises. It is against this backdrop, and in deference to Chinese sensitivities, that India has discouraged the participation of Australia, China perceives that large-scale military exercises such as these are obviously designed to target China’s submarine activities in the East and South China Sea that are aimed at Washington’s “rebalancing” to the Asia-Pacific. One of the reasons India has been reluctant to allow Australia to participate in the Malabar exercises is that New Delhi is not sure whether the current tension between Australia and China will outlast the tenure of the incumbent Labor government in Canberra. India also does not want to annoy China by forging a quadrilateral naval exercise that would be perceived as aimed against Beijing. On a limited scale, however, India has co-opted Australia into the quadrilateral dialogue that resumed in 2017. In addition to the Malabar exercises, India in recent years has also forged maritime co-operation with a number of Southeast Asian countries, notably Vietnam and Singapore.

Yet another facet of India’s “Act East” policy is New Delhi’s initiatives and efforts to develop connectivity in the region, which is seen as a riposte to China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India’s position on BRI is that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, the rule of law, openness, transparency and equal-