

RSTV – India's World: New Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Larger Background:

- The US is “banding together” with nations like India, Australia, Japan and South Korea to ensure that the sovereignty of Indo-Pacific nations is protected and that they are not subjected to any coercion. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said this in a statement.
- This statement was made after the Indian Navy participated with the navies of the US, the Philippines and Japan in their first joint naval exercise in the disputed South China Sea, where China is flexing its muscle.
- The United States has bolstered its military presence in the South China Sea and has put nations on notice around the world that the sale of key infrastructure and technology companies to China threatens their national security.
- The combined show of naval might by the U.S., Japan, the Philippines, and India came at a time of heightened tensions in the trade war between China and the US.
- China claims almost all of the strategic South China Sea with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam pushing competing claims to parts of the resource-rich maritime region.
- The United States, Japan and India do not have any territorial claims there, but want to ensure freedom of navigation.
- This episode of India's World will analyse the new Indo-Pacific strategy.

Critical Analysis of RSTV discussion

Understanding Mike Pompeo's Statement:

- The whole notion of the Indo-Pacific actually came into greater diplomatic parlance in recent times when President Trump came to Asia (his first visit to East Asia) in November 2017. He participated in the East Asia Summit during this period. During this visit, President Trump came to Japan, China, and repeatedly started using the terminology, of Indo-Pacific in the place of Asia Pacific.
- It needs to be remembered that the first time the term Indo-Pacific was used was on Indian soil by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. This was done in the year 2007, when he had visited India and he was addressing the joint session of the Indian Parliament. He mentioned that there is a connect between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It must be remembered that China was rising at that time, and the whole world, and particularly, America also thought that as China grew prosperous, it would start embracing the liberal values of democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech and expression, etc. However this has not happened.
- Thus, today again after about 10 years, when Trump visited Asia, he started talking about it, and that has got great traction. What this really means is that all the countries in the region, should work together to ensure that it becomes an open, free, inclusive, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific region.
- As a matter of fact, as far as India is concerned, the best definition was given at the Shangri-La Dialogue Keynote Address which Prime Minister Modi gave, on the 1st of June, 2018.
- Another important aspect here to keep in mind is the centrality of the ASEAN region. The other aspect is respect for international law, and in particular, the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, 1982). This assumes importance because China is claiming huge chunks of the South China Sea. As a matter of fact, around 85% of the South China Sea is being claimed by China. There are other claimants of the South China Sea as well for example, Vietnam, Brunei, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc.

Is this another element of the trade war between the U.S. and China?

- Fundamentally, the problem is between the United States and China. Also, China is really catching up with the United States in terms of all kinds of sectors, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and

the repeated summit meetings happening either with Africa or the rest of the world with Beijing are indicating China's inevitable rise in that sense. This is putting the United States in certain discomfiture.

- Of course, there are several issues around which China can be questioned. These issues include the forced transfer of technology, the revealing of trade secrets, market access to American companies is another issue, there is also a huge deficit of about 375 Billion Dollars or so- thus it is here that the problem lies.
- In its trade war with China, the United States wants to pump up a banding of nations. India has been a major partner of the United States and it has had naval exercises with the United States; India has also had naval exercises with countries such as Japan, Vietnam, etc. several times.

Should India be collaborating with the U.S. in the South China Sea?

- If you look at the Malabar Exercise, and thereafter the agreements which have been signed with the U.S., the French and the Japanese, it permits one to operate in each other's locality or harbor so to say. If you have the naval warships of 3-4 countries in the South China Sea, not with the express desire to oppose the Chinese but to do naval exercises aimed at interoperability, would put China on the backfoot. One foresees more and more exercises in each other's sea and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which invariably would be very close to the areas that China is claiming as its own territory.
- It is also important to note that India's strategic space in the Indian Ocean region is actually going to shrink with China's arrival and Pakistan being a very close friend. Freedom of navigation would apply to even China and Pakistan- thus a possible reality of them conducting maritime exercises in our own backyard is also a realistic possibility which cannot be denied or disallowed.

Reasons for the battle of Supremacy in the Indo-Pacific Region:

- It is a very rich region in terms of natural resources as well as mineral resources. It is also rich in oil and natural gas and provides ample scope for the growth of fishing industries. Also, about 3.5 trillion dollars worth of international global trade, flows through the South China Sea. As a matter of fact, some of the world's major economies, such as China, Japan, Korea, or the West Coast of the United States, has trade that has to go through the South China Sea. This increases its importance.
- Furthermore, this increases its importance for India as well. About 50% of India's trade is conducted through the South China Sea. China claims that the South China Sea has been under its dominance for the last 2000 years, however, all these claims have been completely rubbished by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016 when they came out with their decision. They had completely rejected all the claims that have been made by China.

What does the international community want?

- The international community wants freedom of navigation, freedom of over flights, and settlement of disputes through dialogue. There have also been decisions over arriving at a code of conduct which also needs to be established there. Thus, although India, U.S. and Japan do not have any territorial claims over this area, as far as the trade life-line for these countries is concerned, the South China Sea is very important. Also, we should not forget that in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), has been prospecting for oil and gas. There have been two blocks, 127 and 128 which India has been prospecting for. There has not been any significant find so far, but China has given warnings to India that no prospecting should be done without seeking the permission of China. However, India has always maintained that these are international waters, and that this is under the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam.
- As far as India is concerned, India is an energy deficient country which imports 82% of its oil and it needs oil wherever it can get it.

Can the countries having competing claims in the South China Sea take on China?

- Humanity is now going beyond continents and into the oceans. Thus, resources can be either Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC's), or they are resources at the bottom of the ocean.
- The oceans and seas also give these competing nations a sense of identity.
- It is important to one look at the littoral states in dispute with China currently.
- It is very interesting that the President of the Philippines (President Duterte), a country which had taken the Court to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, doesn't care about the judgement and the outcome. As a matter of fact, President Duterte is happy to extend an invitation to China as long as they are willing to invest and develop the islands of the Philippines.

- The talk of the international communities on the South China Sea, and the take of the parties in dispute, is at variance. China is able to silence the voices of many of the countries in the South China Sea who may be directly dependent on it in areas such as investment, etc. Thus, the manner in which India, Japan and the U.S. would like to see a solution emerge to the South China Sea is very different to how the nations in the immediate vicinity of the South China Sea look upon the issue.
- Further, no one among the disputing nations are willing and capable of confronting China. Even ASEAN is not able to take a collective position on the dispute concerning the South China Sea.
- **China also believes that the South China Sea is an extension of the continental shelf, and therefore, the dispute is territorial in nature and not maritime.** Therefore, the UNCLOS as such won't have a locus standi to make a judgement on this issue.
- It is here that the geopolitical frame of the Indo-Pacific is being recreated. It is no longer something belonging to the 20th Century where we had the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, as two separate entities, and where the Straits of Malacca were a kind of block or barrier. The Straits of Malacca are now becoming a bridge because trade is connecting everybody, and essentially it is Chinese trade that is connecting much of the littorals of the region (whether it is the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean).
- These are the real compulsions on the ground. Economically, China is leading everybody; while so far, security-wise, it is the United States that is leading so far (but is losing gradually). The United States is unsettled because it is losing much of its ground to China.