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India in the American Vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”

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One of the visible results of U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to Asia in 2017 was the departure of the administration from identifying the region as “Asia-Pacific” for “Indo-Pacific.” This difference testifies to the appreciation of the importance of the Indian Ocean basin in U.S. policy and to India as a partner in helping to hedge China’s regional expansion and maintaining the liberal international rules-based order.

Trump used his visit to Asia on 5–14 November 2017, to promote a vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific.”¹ In his speeches, he consistently used this term instead of “Asia-Pacific,” the dominant description used in the U.S. for the last several decades. Although Trump did not visit India, the country is likely to benefit from the change in terminology in the American strategy towards the continent.

Indo-Pacific. The concept the U.S. presented in Asia is mainly about economic matters and focuses on ensuring “the principles of fair and reciprocal trade.” At the same time, Trump called on all the countries in the region to deal with security threats (e.g., terrorism, drugs, criminal cartels) and uphold principles “like respect for the rule of law, individual rights, and freedom of navigation and overflight, including open shipping lanes.” One of the first concrete examples of multilateral cooperation in this Indo-Pacific concept was a meeting of representatives of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. in a formula called the quadrilateral security dialogue (or “Quad”) on the margins of the East Asia Summit in the Philippines on 13 November 2017. The participants emphasised, among other things, their attachment to a “rules-based international order,” the sovereignty of states, and freedom of navigation.

The return to the Quad, as proposed by Japan in 2007 for the largest democracies in the region to work together on regional security architecture, is associated with growing apprehension about China’s activity in the region, including the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea and increased presence in the Indian Ocean. In addition to closer military cooperation—joint exercises, increased military interoperability—the Quad participants also promise joint investments in high-quality infrastructure connectivity projects in the region as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The starting point for this may be the previously announced Japanese-Indian initiative of the Africa-Asia Growth Corridor or the American vision for the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor.

India as a Counterweight to China. The U.S. perception of India countering China is not new. In 2000, Condoleezza Rice, later National Security Adviser to President George W. Bush, recognised China as a “strategic competitor” of the U.S. and a “potential threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific region,” and indicated in this context the important role of India. However, the attacks of 11 September 2001, and the start of the “global war on terrorism” changed the American administration’s approach. China ceased being

¹ M. Przychodniak, “Trump’s Asia-Pacific Visit: An Ineffective Attempt to Regain U.S. Initiative in the Region,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 110 (1050), 15 November 2017, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-110-1050.

the main challenge. At the same time, the strategic partnership with India initiated in 2004 was strengthened by successive administrations, including as part of the “pivot to Asia” under President Barack Obama. In 2016, India was recognised as a “main defence partner,” which gave the country access to more advanced American military technology. In recent years, the U.S. has overtaken Russia as the main supplier of arms to India.

After several unsuccessful attempts at closer relations with China, Trump’s administration gave a fresh boost to U.S.-India relations. The National Security Strategy (NSS) adopted in December 2017 and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in January this year for the first time recognised China as not only the main rival to the U.S. but even a threat to its interests. The NSS also promises to deepen the strategic partnership with India and support the country in a leading role in security in the Indian Ocean region, while the NDS mentions the expansion of alliances and partnerships in Indo-Pacific as one of the main tasks.

Closer cooperation with India was also recognised as one of the pillars of the new U.S. Strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia from August 2017. A fuller vision of the U.S.-India relationship was presented by Rex Tillerson, then Secretary of State, in a lecture in Washington on 18 October. In it, he said that China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea directly undermine international law and norms, in the defence of which the U.S. and India stand as “two pillars of stability on both sides of the globe.” Although the Indian economy is four times smaller than China’s and defence spending only 20% of what the Chinese spend, India is the main force in Asia that can balance China’s influence in the long term. According to the U.S., India will over time take greater responsibility for protecting sea routes and providing stability and enforcing compliance with international law in the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia.

India as a Global Partner. India is the main regional power in the Indian Ocean. Under its “Act East” policy, it has expanded military and economic engagement in Southeast Asia, especially with Vietnam and Singapore. At the same time, for the U.S., India’s importance goes beyond the Indo-Pacific region and to the global balance of power. As a democratic state with the second biggest population in the world, the seventh-largest economy, and the second-largest military, equipped with nuclear weapons, India will exert significant influence on the shape of the international system.

So far, however, India has been critical of Western countries in such areas as foreign interventions and global governance structures, and lacking recognition of their role and aspirations in the world, India has tightened relations with countries that seek to undermine the existing international system. Significant here is the trilateral cooperation between Russia, China, and India initiated in 2003, and the broader BRICS bloc of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) formalised in 2009. To not jeopardise relations with China, India ceased cooperation in the Quad in 2008 after Australia withdrew and was not interested in reactivating it until recently.

The resumption of the Quad in 2017 indicates an important change in India’s strategic approach. This was possible due to the weakening ties with Russia, but above all, increasingly difficult relations with China. Unresolved border disputes, the growing Chinese presence in South Asia, including the intensified Sino-Pakistani alliance, the negatively perceived BRI, and the military standoff on the Doklam border region in the summer of 2017, all made India adopt a more critical attitude towards China. At the same time, because of India’s traditional policy of non-alignment and the disproportion in potential in relation to its northern neighbour, India does not want to be seen as part of any formal anti-China alliance.

International Consequences. The adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept by the U.S. consolidates the process of a shift in focus from Europe to Asia and extends the area of competition with China to the Indian Ocean. The closer cooperation of the Quad countries in security (e.g., joint exercises, patrols) and economic matters (e.g., investments in infrastructure) will help limit China’s expansion. However, the Quad will not become a military pact and will evolve as a coordination forum open to other partners sharing concerns about China. Nevertheless, the greater appreciation of the geopolitical importance of India by the U.S. will support the further strengthening of their bilateral cooperation. That should strengthen the U.S. position as the main supplier of weapons and a new source of oil and gas for India.

The new expressions of U.S. appreciation of the significance of India, may be conducive to intensifying cooperation between India and other Western partners, in particular NATO, which has not had an institutionalised dialogue with India so far. It could grant India the status of “global partner” (similar to that of Japan and Australia). Also, the EU, which expresses concerns about China’s foreign and security policy, may deepen its strategic partnership with India, especially in new areas, such as maritime security and freedom of navigation, implementation of joint development projects, or connectivity initiatives in the Indian Ocean region. Stronger U.S. and EU countries’ relations with India also prevents the transformation of BRICS into an anti-Western alliance, which serves stability of the global order based on observance of international law, human rights, and democracy. For Poland, the U.S.-India partnership creates a favourable situation for deepening bilateral defence and political cooperation with India.