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INDIA IN THE NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY

Pooja Bhatt

Research Associate, CAPS

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Early in January 2018, US Secretary of Defence James Mattis released the 11 page National Defence Strategy (NDS) which follows the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Trump Administration released last month. Together, the two documents showcase the strategic priorities of the US and the way forward. The NDS would be a crucial document for the Asian region in general and India in particular given the emphasis on the region. It mentions 'Indo-Pacific' seven times and China eight times. Like NDS, the recent NSS, too, gives ample attention to the Indo-Pacific region (33 mentions in a 50 page document). Given the current developments in the Indo-Pacific, India can play an important role with nations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in converging our broader security concerns before aligning itself with the US policy in the region.

The previous NDS in 2012 under Obama administration too laid considerable focus on Asia-Pacific in addition to terrorism. While the external policy was aimed at South Asia and

Middle East region, prosperity of its European and NATO allies and attaining peace in Korean peninsula, Asia-Pacific was an overarching issue for the previous administration under its 'Rebalance to Asia' strategy in which India was considered the 'lynchpin'. It should be noted that India was considered a key regional partner by both administrations with some change in the broader emphasis.

The NDS 2018 is clearly reflective of the changing geopolitical realities in Asia. China's territorial and maritime overtures in the Indian Ocean, regional instability due to North Korea's repeated nuclear and missile tests, along with increased salience of South Asian and South East Asian economies in international trade and commerce has brought the region into the limelight. US administration has shifted its focus from Asia Pacific to 'Indo-Pacific' as a reference point of its maritime strategy towards the region.

With Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) coming to a standstill, the US is looking for

multilateral economic arrangements by building regional cooperation in addition to bilateral trade arrangements with Asian economies.

Strategically, apart from building missile defence systems with Japan and South Korea to checkmate North Korea, President Trump has shown keenness on aligning policies among the 'Quad' consisting of India, Australia, Japan and the US to counter China's rise. China is a territorial and maritime neighbour as well as major trading partner of all the three Asian countries in the grouping and, therefore, the security perceptions of these three might differ from that of the US.

With India as America's 'major defence partner' the NDS seeks to further expand the defence cooperation between the two countries with particular emphasis on military purchases. However, as an emerging economic and military player in the region, New Delhi has its own national interests and regional concerns and addressing those goes beyond mere defence deals. India's neighbourhood is demonstrating changes under China's influence. Chinese infrastructure and loan diplomacy has ingressed India's immediate neighbourhood. Furthermore, there has been constant Chinese strategic presence in the IOR as well as on its territorial borders with India. At the multilateral level, India is checkmated by China on the issues of terrorism and India's membership into the nuclear suppliers' group. Additionally, the region

suffers the wrath of climate change disasters, humanitarian crisis, piracy, trafficking and so on.

Over the last three years India embarked on a major diplomatic engagement to secure its relations with its immediate neighbourhood as well as further its relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) under the "Act East" Policy to counter China. The presence of all the 10 ASEAN leaders at the Republic Day parade this year demonstrates India's acknowledgement as a leading regional player in the Indian Ocean region. However, there is little tangible evidence of any significant outcome of the engagement so far. In addition, the focus on the "Act East" policy has led to some neglect of its immediate territorial neighbours and China, through its infrastructure and loan diplomacy, has made its presence in these countries.

China has invested significant political, economic and diplomatic capital to push ahead its ambitious and overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), given that, eventually, its economy would be dependent upon its (BRI's) success and cooperation with other states. Hence, while Beijing may continue its aggressive posture in the region, it would not want to destabilise the region which would hurt its own economy. Countries within the Indo-Pacific need to constantly be aware of it and develop their policies so to avoid stoking further insecurities.

Presence of navy chiefs of all four quad nations and recognition of China as a 'disruptive

power' by the Indian Foreign Secretary at the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi emphasised China as a regional challenge and the common threat perception shared by India and the US. No single country in the Indo-Pacific region can rise to the challenge posed by China and other above-mentioned security issues alone and therefore, requires building of consensus and unity. India can be that 'consensus builder' amongst its neighbourhood before moving ahead with its role as 'net security provider' in the region. Moreover, an efficient and working regional architecture will require convergence in other spheres beyond a common threat perception.

(Disclaimer: Parts of this article have been published as op-ed in The Hindu newspaper on Jan 30, 2018. This is the complete version. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])