

# Indo-Pacific Oration II

## Opening Address

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Honorable Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Madam Julie Bishop, High Commissioner of Australia to India Madam Sidhu, senior dignitaries from the Indian and Australian governments, Excellencies, friends and colleagues, I am delighted to welcome you all to this second Indo-Pacific Oration.

Madam minster, it is indeed fitting that you graced this platform for our inaugural oration. That was in April 2015..... a time when the world and the Indo Pacific was looking quite different from what we see today. Those were the days when the pivot to Asia was still part of strategic parlance....as was the Trans Pacific Partnership. And at that time you had said something which today makes me think that perhaps your prescience had already recognized the rumblings of distant thunder.....you had said Let me quote “the great challenge of the Indo-Pacific era isn’t the rise of any one power... it is the way in which, for the first time in centuries, we will manage a region which is home to many powers.” Unquote ....

Call it a quirk of history, an anomaly, but even at the time of the world’s bi-polar moment, even at the height of the Cold War, the Indo Pacific as a region remained characterized by the lack of any overarching collective security system like NATO. What it continued to have in place instead was a network of coalitions of interests that have since been constantly evolving and adapting to the changing realities. Today, these very coalitions, in a different world have come to symbolize and be symptomatic of a far more complex world that has moved beyond the simple binaries of yesterday.

As things stand Australia, Japan, US and India are compelled to have strong and growing relations with countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and the ASEAN countries. They are also compelled to continue having a complex relationship with China... for very much similar reasons.

The rise of China does present a conundrum....here is an economic relationship that has powered the last few decades, a relationship that has woven itself across the economic pathways of the world, but which also has become a strategic challenge that will have to be nudged and shaped to make it beneficial. And that is easier said than done!!!

Through Infrastructure projects across Asia, its ports and sea lanes, such as Djibouti and Gwadar in the Indian Ocean, rail links across the land mass of Eurasia, in bits and pieces,

slowly but surely, a giant jig saw puzzle is being assembled. Many see it as one that will shape the economic and “political landscape” for Eurasia under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative. Some countries are playing along hoping to further their economic interests and development goals, while others are waiting and watching from the sidelines. But there remain many for whom it is inevitable that the new Chinese narrative will not find universal resonance.

The political challenge in India's case is complicated by the disadvantage of a close to 4000 Km long border, and a restive and niggling Western front which the Dragon is forever ready to stoke and use to its strategic advantage. So India, for one, has chosen to stay away from the Chinese project, citing concerns around sovereignty, financial sustainability, transparency and ecology.

The scale and scope of the 2017 Malabar Exercise, which ended just yesterday, with three aircraft carriers from India, the US and Japan participating, while officially careful to skirt any suggestion that these were aimed at any particular country do reveal the willingness to embrace a ‘coalition of democracies’ in order to exercise a security partnership in the region to secure the maritime commons. Despite the fact that Australia could not take part in this year’s exercise, the coming together of India, Japan and the US is in many ways a pointer to the future.

Even as there may yet be reluctance to expand the Malabar naval exercise, held alternately in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific into a quadrilateral, India has joined Japan and Australia in a trilateral dialogue, the first of which was held in June 2015 and the third more recently in April, 2017.

So will our democracies, not alone but with each other, through treaties and agreements, cajoling and hand holding and building networked security arrangements, continue to hold ground, to enforce norms in the Indo Pacific and the landmass that is Eurasia. To not do that would be to allow Beijing to play that role and foist its own version of a new world order in the region.

Speaking of this concert of democracies brings me to my second point. As a democratically elected Government in the US repeatedly asserts an America first policy, we are also seeing a major flux in the domestic politics of Japan and Australia. Trump’s unwillingness to continue with his predecessor’s ‘pivot to Asia’ as well as the refusal to endorse the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, the constant sniping at alliances in the Asia Pacific, has served to unsettle some very settled assumptions on the role of the US in the region and the world.

In Japan, another democracy, Shinzo Abe’s faces domestic challenges as he attempts to rewrite his country’s constitution in order to reconfigure its closely held pacifist legacy to embrace the emerging reality of far greater self-reliance in matters of national security. The wave of new legislations, unpopular economic reforms have even begun to cast doubts on his ability to stay in power, with polls revealing that his personal popularity is at its lowest since 2012.

In Australia, too there is evidence of a wide ranging debate on the nature of the country's relationship with China and the influence it exercises over public debates. Segments in Australia voice concern over the substantive investments made by the Chinese in critical infrastructure such as ports and energy projects as well as real estate across the country.

The outcome of the public debates in these countries, democracies, all of them, is bound to have enormous repercussions for Asia. As these countries grapple with their own destinies, rising uncertainty about their policies vis-a-vis the Indian Ocean Region is bound to create uncertainty for the politics of Asia.

The third challenge lies in understanding the developmental trajectories of the various states around the Indian Ocean Region. Its littoral States, home today to 40 per cent of the world's population, endowed with many of the world's most important minerals and home to a diverse range of marine biology, are undergoing transformational changes. These are the countries characterized by what was to be the great demographic opportunity of the 21st century. As deep structural transformations let loose by the new industrial revolution changes the nature of jobs, skills, opportunities the promise of the demographic dividend that was to be their prize in the 21st century can rapidly turn into a challenge if not yet a nightmare. And domestic compulsions may yet again and again force geo-economics to trump pure geopolitics. The young populations of the Indian Ocean Region stand in stark contrast to the aging populations and slowing economies of the west. As the centre of economic growth shifts from the west to the east, it carries with it the imperative that will shape the political and economic order in this region. So the political landscape is only going to get more complex.

Madam Minister ORF believes in creating platforms for leaders in the region so that they can engage across countries, articulate their vision, to communicate with citizens, communities and policy planners here in India and in the region. As a key stakeholder of this Asian project and an important partner to India, your speech on Australia's vision for itself and its expectations from its partners is therefore keenly awaited by the audience here and those viewing this oration as it is live streamed to audiences globally.

Madam Minister it is my pleasure and privilege to invite you to deliver this second Indo-Pacific Oration this evening...