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Security, Economy, and Ecology: Setting Priorities for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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F E B R U A R Y 2 0 2 2

Introduction

In the 20th century, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the pivotal theatres of inter-state contestation and competition, yet also of cooperation. The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ itself has been propounded by some of the key stakeholders in the region, including the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and is considered a combination “of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean,” or “these two oceans and the surrounding countries.”¹ However, while it is largely considered as “an interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean” by most nations, its geographic expanse is variedly defined.²

Politically, prominent players in the Indo-Pacific include China, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, along with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and different island states in the

Indo-Pacific rim (also called littoral states). The region has gained enormous political, strategic, and economic importance for the emerging Asian order, especially amidst two crucial developments. One is the meteoric rise of China in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, which has compelled other powers to temper the balance of power in the region. China’s irredentist claims, especially in the East and South China sea regions, leave room for territorial contestations with states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan.³ The other is the relative decline of US influence in the region, which has made it imperative and opportune for other notable powers such as Japan, Australia and India, to play their own roles in maintaining political stability and promoting economic sustainability in the Indo-Pacific.⁴

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Economically, the Indo-Pacific is a centre of global trade and commerce, and therefore a potential area of economic prosperity for the countries in the region. It accounts for 65 percent of the world's population, 63 percent of the world's GDP, and 46 percent of the world's merchandise trade.⁵ The region also dominates 50 percent of the world's maritime trade.⁶ Additionally, the Indo-Pacific is home to some of the most diverse global commons of the world, making great-power rivalry over access to such resources a potential flashpoint in the region.⁷

This report discusses the Indo-Pacific as a theatre of strategic contestation and explores potential areas of inter-state cooperation in the region—especially in the spheres of security, connectivity, and economy—while considering emerging environmental concerns.

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The Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific Construct

The ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct is envisaged primarily as a counterpoise to the increasing strategic and economic dominance of China in the region, but the various stakeholders have differing interpretations of what constitutes it. Thus, a coherent vision of the region remains elusive. Moreover, while a broad consensus exists for the need to uphold a “free and open Indo-Pacific”—argued by Japan and the US, and supported by nations such as Australia and India—the countries remain ambiguous in their stance vis-à-vis China’s role in the visualisation of the region.

The US is driven primarily by its desire to play a balancing role in the region and contain the hegemonic consolidation of China in the region. The situation has only exacerbated with the

growing US-China trade war, though the two countries have made efforts to initiate discussion.⁸ Japan, meanwhile, while sharing the US’s vision of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’, gives greater priority to infrastructure development—not only in the East Asian region but also in the Middle East and Africa. In recent years, the US has encouraged India to play a more prominent role in the region to consolidate its response to China’s strategic advancements. However, India has cautiously pitched for an inclusive vision for the region for all powers, through the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his address at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018, reiterated that India's conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific stretches "from Africa to Americas, thereby covering the entire Indian and Pacific oceans, in tandem with that of Japan."⁹ He said India's vision was not directed against any country. This, despite China's aggravated border disputes with India, which makes Chinese influence in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) a strategic concern for India. Indeed, India's reservations over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of China's grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), makes it India's priority to balance China through alternative multilateral collaborations.

Australia too, has taken a non-confrontationist view of the region as it has economic stakes with China. It is advocating for a free and stable Indo-Pacific, while maintaining an alliance with the US and working on newer collaborations with Japan, South Korea, and India.¹⁰ The ASEAN countries, being at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, have taken a more "transactional" perspective on the Indo-Pacific concept based on a strategic

balancing between the US and China and have "emphasised the need to acknowledge the indispensability of 'ASEAN centrality' for all strategic-economic collaborations in the region."¹¹ The rising prominence of the region has also been acknowledged by extra-regional actors such as the European Union (EU), which views the region from its own strategic vantage point.

Therefore, the construct of the Indo-Pacific as a counter to China's strategic overreach is replete with limitations due to the divergent strategic interests and economic imperatives of the stakeholder nations. For now, it is imperative to find areas of convergence that transcend the diversities, to constructively engage countries through economic, connectivity, and ecological imperatives in the region.

Security Cooperation

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a prominent geostrategic landscape in recent years, especially in light of China's growing presence in the region. The region has witnessed the proliferation of multilateral and minilateral platforms for cooperation and dialogue amongst various stakeholders, such as the Quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad) of India, the US, Australia, and Japan; the India-Australia-Japan and the India-Indonesia-Australia trilaterals; and the newly created AUKUS, an alliance of Australia, the UK, and the US.¹² While these forums prioritise strategic security concerns in the region, they also have the potential to expand their cooperation to domains such as the economy and health security. The Quad, for instance, played an instrumental role in Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy in the region.^{13,14}

India, as one of the aspiring powers in the region, has been an active participant in platforms such as the East Asia Summit Association of South-east Asian Nations Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum, BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), and India-Pacific Islands Cooperation.¹⁵ Despite India's strained geopolitical relations with China in recent years, their multi-layered engagements—along with the historically promising India-Russia relationship—can play a key role in promoting shared prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. India's growing naval cooperation¹⁶ with countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia¹⁷ adds to this dynamic of security cooperation in the region.

Moreover, since the early 2000s, the Japan-India strategic relationship has grown,¹⁸ allowing both countries to overcome domestic and regional hurdles. China's growing geoeconomic prominence and its territorial disputes with other states have driven India-Japan cooperation.

There is potential for the two nations to engage in joint exercises, similar to those that India conducts with Russia, the US, and the UK. India and Japan can also collaborate on expanding expeditionary capabilities such as cadet-training, mid-career training programs, and intelligence-sharing; defence, trade and technology;^a and contingency planning for specific scenarios, akin to the Japan-US exercise.¹⁹ Identifying complementarities in Official Development Assistance (ODA),²⁰ for the developing as well as less developed countries, also presents scope for future cooperation.

At the same time, these developments raise questions about the centrality of the Southeast Asian nations in the region. After all, these countries have shaped the ambit of socioeconomic progress and regional security in the Indo-Pacific over the

last three decades. For instance, the emergence of prominent security partnerships such as the Quad and AUKUS, while not explicitly seeking to replace ASEAN or ASEAN-led initiatives, illustrate the keenness of other countries outside of Southeast Asia to play a more prominent role in furthering security and economic growth in the region.

Similarly, Southeast Asian countries face key policy challenges that hinder regional economic integration. While the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* adopted in 2019²¹ was a step towards creating a common framework, the document fails to merit the urgency with which the ASEAN countries should take cognisance of the intensifying geo-political dynamics in the region. It merely serves as a set of guiding principles that the members of the ASEAN can refer to while formulating their national foreign policy documents to pursue their individual goals in the Indo-Pacific. It does not provide concrete ground on which the South-east Asian countries can come together in the context of geopolitics, security and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region.

a However, the two countries will have to share ground through finding common projects, aligning domestic goals and balancing costs.

Overall, there remains a gap between what is needed and what is provided in terms of functional security or strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to fill this gap, amidst the churning of the geopolitical landscape in the region, which

has only been fast-tracked by the Covid-19 pandemic.²² To this end, the diverse actors in the region must explore common grounds for enhancing cooperative endeavours—with a broader view of security, to include health, information as well as human security.

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Trade and Connectivity

With the prospects of a changing global economic order looming large against the backdrop of China's BRI, it is necessary to examine the internal dynamics of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region with respect to regional connectivity²³ and economic integration. The emergence of insulating tendencies amongst economies that were once proponents of a more globalised world order, rising nationalistic fervours and 'strongman' rulers,²⁴ and the Covid-19 pandemic,²⁵ have further challenged the status quo. While potential security arrangements such as the Quad have attempted to combat these challenges, their influence in the purely economic sectors have remained largely limited. For instance, despite significant geopolitical tensions between the countries, China-India trade volumes exceeded USD 100 billion in October 2021—indicating a decoupling between their political interests and economic goals.²⁶

The Indo-Pacific region consists of 38 countries—constituting a large share in world population and global gross domestic product (GDP)—making it a key player in both product and factor markets.²⁷ With a 46-percent share in world merchandise trade and a sizeable percentage of global maritime²⁸ trade routed through this region, the issues of trade, commerce and connectivity can be pivotal to regional integration and development in the Indo-Pacific. Key to boosting regional commercial ties will be enhancing physical and digital connectivity; diversifying trade networks; and building resilient systems of communication and infrastructure. However, it remains imperative to understand the optimal scope of such a market, its role in the Global Value Chains (GVCs), the existing or potential forward and backward linkages, the nature of trade arrangements that would be most favourable, and the existing trade-offs between national economic goals and broader regional ones.

Both digital connectivity and physical connectivity and infrastructure are instrumental in the progress of trade and economic growth in the region—facilitating the movement of goods and other factors of production. In particular, the poor state of digital connectivity in the region has hindered economic integration in the Indo-Pacific. Many island states in the region, for example, East Timor, are unable to adequately participate in regional trade due to lack of proper digital connectivity.²⁹ While most countries to the east of the Indo-Pacific have sufficient undersea cable connectivity, the Bay of Bengal region lags behind.³⁰ The absence of terrestrial cables further worsens the situation in these parts of the Indo-Pacific.³¹ Despite solutions such as the UNCTAD Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA)—^b a customs information database aimed at removing barriers to trade—connectivity issues continue to affect trade significantly.³² Countries in Europe and North America, on the other hand, are well-connected by terrestrial cables that are more resilient against disruptions.

Enhancing overall connectivity will help generate greater economic opportunities for the entire population in the Indo-Pacific region. Promotion of e-commerce can also lower transaction costs and create a level playing field for small businesses. While the Fourth Industrial Revolution was already paving the way for such advances, the Covid-19 pandemic has fast-tracked the process. The Indo-Pacific region includes both smaller and larger players with varied endowments and capacities to fund diverse infrastructural development, which can potentially drive a digital divide among the regional partners. However, careful collaboration and cooperation can make technology work more efficiently in the region. Regulatory issues related to cybersecurity, fraud, information-sharing, digital-inclusion strategies, and digital literacy should also be considered.

b Its member countries include Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

“Enhancing overall connectivity will help generate greater economic opportunities for the Indo-Pacific population.”

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and supply chain disruptions have underlined the need for diversifying and increasing supply chain resilience. In this context, some recent initiatives such as the ASEAN-Japan Joint Initiative for Economic Resilience and Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (involving the Quad countries) were introduced to facilitate the flow of goods and build more resilient supply chains.³³ India has exerted efforts to insert itself into the global supply chains that exist in the region by supporting the formation of larger Indian multi-nationals. Cooperation from countries such as the US or Japan, in the form of opening up their existing supply chains to enable India's integration, is a critical first step. Additionally, the emerging trends of de-globalisation and consolidation among multi-nationals pose further challenges to India's ability to plug itself into global supply chains.

Finally, it is now critical to develop an underlying broader and more robust economic architecture to support economic integration in the Indo-Pacific region. While the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) encompasses some of the countries in the region under a common free trade agreement (FTA), it still covers only a relatively small part of the entire Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, commitments made by countries as part of the RCEP are much less stringent than their bilateral commitments, which further restricts its scope as a common operating framework. Unless a broader conceptual framework can be worked out, it falls upon individual nations and private multi-nationals to drive commerce and connectivity in the region.³⁴

Environmental Concerns

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly around the Bay of Bengal, are vulnerable to a large number of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats, which sometimes outweigh the more traditional ones. Various anthropogenic changes have emerged in the region over the past years, such as river flows, sedimentation patterns, groundwater or land-use patterns. Moreover, adverse fallouts of human commercial activities and their ecological impacts demand urgent attention.

It is important to investigate the current challenges in the region that need to be addressed on priority. Moreover, it will help to identify national or regional strategies that have successfully addressed NTS challenges in the region, to replicate these best practices wherever relevant. For instance, Asian countries are disaster-prone, with floods and

cyclones being common occurrences, but most of them have managed to implement adequate disaster-management measures. These countries have also done well in terms of addressing NTS challenges, particularly those caused by natural disasters—for example, by resorting to community-based resilience and best practices.³⁵ These include mitigation strategies aimed at reducing the immediate impact of the disasters, e.g. working on better building materials or structures, training community members in emergency response, educating children at a younger age by bringing in disaster-risk reduction curriculum into early learning experiences. Such local efforts have also been critical in shaping up larger national strategies.

One of the most critical challenges that persist is the lack of communication support and needs-based resource allocation to the areas that are most vulnerable, for example those living in low-lying locations and dependent on ecosystem services for their livelihoods. Thus, it is imperative to develop more dynamic and flexible frameworks, with tailored approaches. Regional cooperation, education, policy tools for disaster-risk reduction, and private-sector engagements can pave the way, depending on each partner country's capacity and financial resources.

The US-based Vision Planning and Consulting (VPC)³⁶ is developing a database to include disaster-risk reduction, risk management, and navigation strategies and plans for governments to align their initiatives. So far, the VPC has yielded good results. The IOM Asia-Pacific Regional Data Hub is another example of such concerted efforts towards knowledge-sharing in the region.³⁷ One challenge is posed by climate-change-induced migration, which has received little attention in the US in terms of a broader strategic thinking. Asia, on the other hand, has been dealing with these issues for a long time, due to frequent instances of coastal flooding and other natural disasters. This is one area where the US can learn from Asia.

Bangladesh, for one, has scored remarkable progress in responding to NTS challenges.³⁸ It has established the Coastal Crisis Management Centres (CCMCs),³⁹ improved resilience through a concerted approach towards capacity-building, and transformed itself into a provider of disaster relief to other countries around the Bay, for instance, during the 2016 Sri Lanka floods or the 2014 water crisis in Maldives.⁴⁰ Japan and the US⁴¹ have been important partners in supporting the establishment of these crisis management setups in countries such as Maldives and Bangladesh. However, there remains significant scope to improve trust among partners in the context of military or para-military involvements to support relief measures on overseas land.

Various incidents over the past two years have highlighted the need for widening the aperture of environmental governance to include risk mitigation or rehabilitation strategies in response to incidents such as oil spills or chemical leaks into the high seas. These factors are not only a serious threat to environmental security in terms of depletion of quality of life under water and other ecosystem services they support, but are also critical to various economic sectors across countries in the region, such as the luxury tourism industry in Maldives.

To ensure the collective sustainable use of the high seas, international legal requirements are a welcome start. In 2020, the International Maritime Organisations (IMO) introduced legal curbs on the sulphur content of ship fuels, requiring global stakeholders to operationally address the impacts of environmental threats.⁴²

Two other crucial issues that have recently emerged in the Indian Ocean Region are Illegal Unregulated Unreported (IUU) fishing and marine litter.⁴³ The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these threats. While some countries in the region—for example, Southeast Asian states—have national action plans, there is a need for complementary responses such as joint capacity-building. The coastal states in the Indian Ocean Region can draw lessons from the Pacific Island states on the importance of enhancing the


effectiveness of monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement mechanisms, through increased regional cooperation and collaboration.⁴⁴

A security partnership platform in the Indo-Pacific region, similar to the Pacific Security Partnership Forum, can be established and spearheaded by sponsoring countries to hold talks about the impending threats. Such a forum can then formulate suitable mitigation and response strategies at the regional level. Without concerted efforts to combat the threats emerging from NTS challenges in the region, they can quickly translate into conventional security challenges, altogether destabilising the Indo-Pacific construct.⁴⁵

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Conclusion

Global powers are increasingly recognising the political and economic significance of the Indo-Pacific region in catering to the present and future needs of the states in the region and beyond. While concerted attempts are being made by the constituent states in the region to explore areas of cooperation to balance China's growing strategic and economic influence over the Indo-Pacific, such security alliances pose a unique set of structural limitations and challenges. Indeed, given China's economic and diplomatic heft in the region, engaging with it in constructive endeavours will be helpful for the larger prosperity goals of the region.

To keep up with the deeply embedded forces of a globalised economy, regional stakeholders must proactively work towards the institutionalised advancement of interconnected technology-sharing initiatives, digital cooperation, knowledge-sharing, and sustainable development in the domain of trade, connectivity and infrastructural growth. An increased focus on human security in the spheres of health, people-to-people links, and cultural exchanges can help forge more durable interconnectedness in the region. Finally, regional actors must address the burgeoning environmental threats and climate-change-induced challenges in the region, through effective joint disaster mitigation and resilient management architectures. 

The authors have referred to the deliberations of the “International Conference on Strategic High Tide in the Indo-Pacific: Economics, Ecology and Security,” held on 9-10 November 2021, organised by ORF Kolkata in collaboration with the Consulate General of Japan in Kolkata.

Endnotes

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 - a. Dhruva Jaishankar, Executive Director, Observer Research Foundation, America
 - b. Collin Koh Swee Lean, Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore
 - c. Satu Limaye, Vice President & Director, East West Center, USA
 - d. Shruti Pandalai, Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi
 - e. Daisuke Kawai, Research Fellow Indo-Pacific Affairs, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Japan
 - f. Akriti Vasudeva, Research Analyst with the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center and Editor-at-large at South Asian Voices, US

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 - a. Rohan Samarajiva, Founder, LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka
 - b. Takuma Otaki, Advisor to Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Government of Japan, and Policy Director of JETRO, New Delhi
 - c. Akshay Mathur, Director, Observer Research Foundation, Mumbai
 - d. Arpita Mukherjee, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi
 - e. Saon Ray, Senior Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi

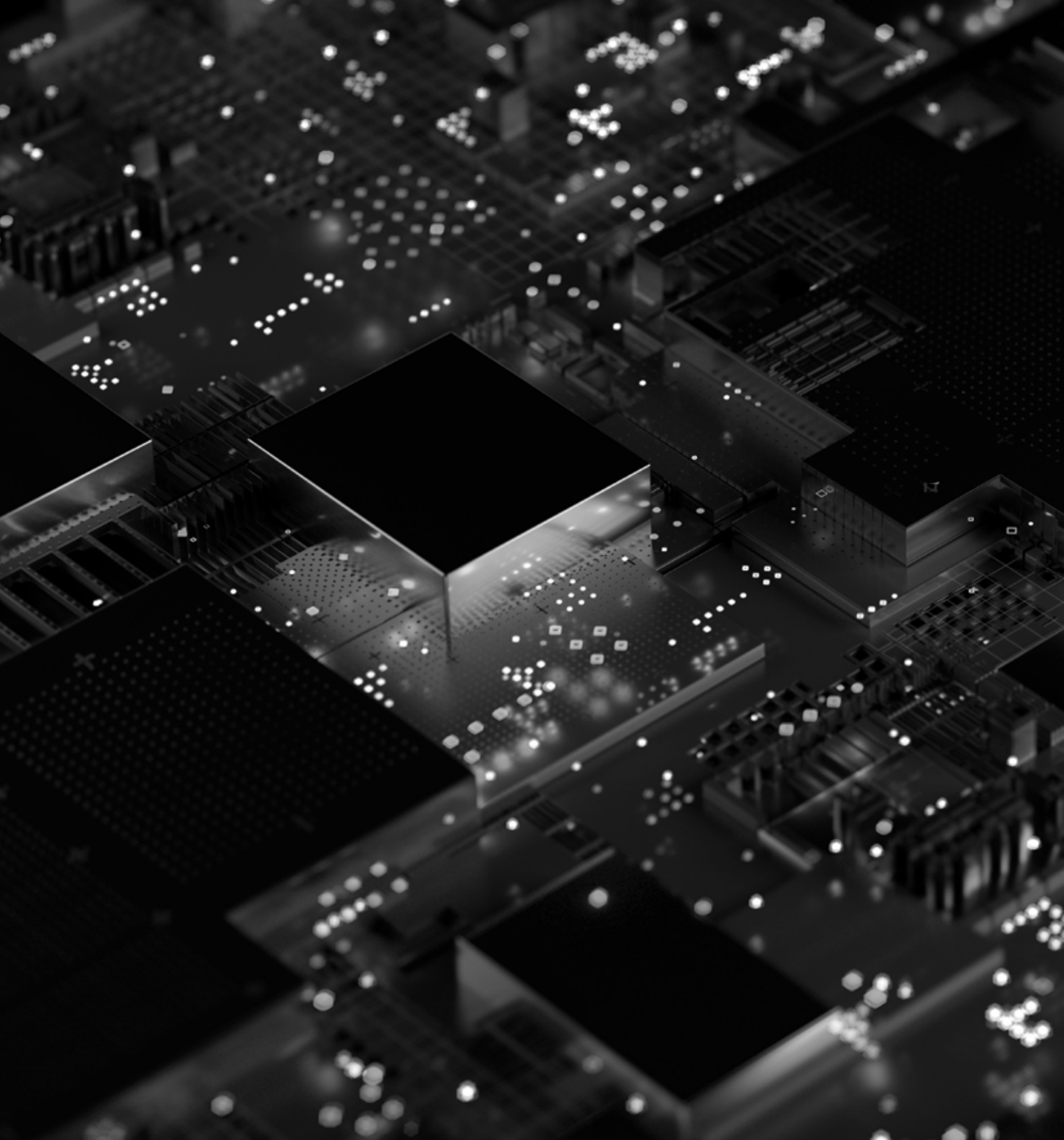
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- 45 This section encapsulates the points made by the speakers at ORF-Japan’s conference on “Strategic High Tide in the Indo-Pacific: Economics, Ecology, and Security – Business Session III: Environmental Concerns and Engagements.” The session was chaired by Anamitra Anurag Danda, Senior Visiting Fellow at ORF Kolkata. The following were the speakers:
 - a. Nilanthi Samaranayake, Director, CNA’s Strategy and Policy Analysis Program, USA
 - b. Ashley Johnson, Director for the Energy and Environmental Affairs Group, The National Bureau of Asian Research, US
 - c. David Brewster, Senior Research Fellow, National Security College, Australian National University, Australia
 - d. Anthony Bergin, Senior Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Australia
 - e. Julius Cesar I. Trajano, Research Fellow, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies Centre, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore
 - f. Tariq Karim, Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at Independent University, Bangladesh

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