Webinar on
Reinforcing the 2016 Arbitral Victory: The West Philippine Sea in the Convergence of Strategies

India's Evolving Foreign Policy and Indo-Pacific Vision

A very good morning. It is a privilege to be joining this distinguished forum, for which I want to thank - Amb Rosario, Prof Dindo Manhit and the Stratbase Forum.

Let me declare at the outset that the views I will express are my own, and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the Government of India.

Maritime and Cultural contacts between India and the Indo-Pacific region have taken place over the past 2000 years. Yet, it was not until 1992 that India announced a Look East Policy, later upgraded as the Act East Policy by Prime Minister Modi in 2014.   A new approach to the Indo-Pacific became an integral part of the Act East Policy.

In 2018, speaking at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, Prime Minister Modi articulated a comprehensive Indo-Pacific policy.   Among its many objectives were 4 principal tenets: (1) A free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific; (2) the centrality of ASEAN; (3) Freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce and; (4) a vision for a rule based and democratic international order.

If this sounds familiar and commonplace today, it is because these principles have enjoyed a sizeable consensus within the international community in recent years.

We have seen a resounding affirmation of this approach, in the last few weeks, from conclaves like the G7 Summit, the US-EU Summit, the NATO Summit and the India-EU Summit.   Bilaterally, India's strategic partners like the US, Japan, UK, France and Australia have also expressed their solidarity with India's Indo-Pacific Policy.

In the discussions around the world, and even in today's conference, there is always the shadow of the elephant or shall I say the dragon in the room.   Some like the US or the EU openly name and shame China, while others are more discreet.

Let us be honest and confront the issue squarely.   The Indo-Pacific region is facing a challenge from an aggressive, acquisitive and hegemonic China -   a country that questions the very idea of an international order based on respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, the rule of law and freedom of access to the global commons.

India, until recently, was among the discreet nations which maintained an ambivalent policy towards China. Every leader of India, from Pandit Nehru onwards has persevered to establish normal, if not friendly relations with China.   And nobody has worked harder to achieve this than Prime Minister Modi.   He has held a record 18 Summit meetings with President Xi Jinping in five years.

China's response to these overtures was a brutal message.   In May 2020, Chinese troops marched across the North Western border of India in an audacious attempt to grab territory – a tactic, which is now familiar to all countries in the region.

2020, was for India a point of no-return with China.

Well; coming back to India's Indo-Pacific policy. This has progressed on two parallel tracks. One, is the deepening of its strategic partnership with ASEAN, supplemented by strong bilateral ties with key member states like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore.

The other track is the Quad, or the quadrilateral partnership between India, the US, Japan and Australia. Starting in 2004, the Quad initially functioned as a consultation forum; meeting at senior official level on the side-lines of international meetings. It went off the radar after 2008, but was revitalised in 2017 in a new and more robust version.

China has accused the Quad of ganging up against it and for trying to create an Asian NATO.

That the Quad is China-centric is undeniable, but the label of an Asian NATO is ridiculous. The Quad is not a security organisation. At its virtual summit in March this year, the leaders discussed a wide-ranging agenda, from COVID vaccine production and distribution to climate change and maritime security. Nonetheless, the Quad is acquiring a sharper edge with more frequent consultations at leadership level and increasingly complex joint military exercises.

In March 2019, I visited Manila with a group of Indian experts and recall the stimulating discussion I had with Amb Rosario. Many important issues were raised by him regarding the Quad. He described it as "too informal", questioned the credibility of future American support, sought my views on ASEAN centrality and highlighted ASEAN's hesitation in dealing with the Quad.

Amb Rosario, I feel I have better answers to those questions today than two years ago.

Yes, the Americans, and most recently, the Biden administration have pledged to strengthen their support for the Quad. In fact, Pres. Biden himself hosted the first ever QUAD Summit on 12 March 2021.

The issue of ASEAN centrality is a more delicate one. ASEAN solidarity, which we all took for granted, has shown cracks in recent years, especially in facing Chinese pressures and inducements. I believe, that while ASEAN's role will be indispensable for meeting the security challenges of the region, it can no longer be seen as the net or exclusive security provider.

ASEAN, therefore, needs to look at initiatives like the QUAD with an open mind. The Quad, which shares its value system with the ASEAN, would certainly welcome a pan-ASEAN dialogue or even limited, issue-based cooperation with leading powers like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Today, is the 5th anniversary of the award of the PCA in favour of the Philippines and I wish to felicitate Amb Rosario for his sagacity, perseverance and courage in securing this historic judgement.

It is a tragedy that five years down the line, the Philippines is still waiting for the restoration of its sovereignty over the islands and the waters of the West Philippine Sea. This is a litmus test for all stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. A just maritime order in the region will not be credible until justice has been carried out in the Philippines.

Thank you.

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