

## The New Great Game moves from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

Is the world's center of gravity shifting to the heart of the Indo-Pacific – a new pivot to Asia?

By [PEPE ESCOBAR](#) DECEMBER 7, 2017 1:16 PM (UTC+8)



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In the context of the New Great Game in Eurasia, the New Silk Roads, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), integrates all of China's instruments of national power – political, economic, diplomatic, financial, intellectual and cultural – to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitical/geoeconomic order. BRI is the organizing concept of China's foreign policy for the foreseeable future; the heart of what was conceptualized, even before President Xi Jinping, as China's "peaceful rise."

The Trump administration's reaction to the breath and scope of BRI has been somewhat minimalistic. For the moment, it amounts to a terminological switch from what was previously known as Asia-Pacific to "Indo-Pacific." The Obama administration, up to the former president's last visit to Asia in September 2016, always referred to Asia-Pacific.

Indo-Pacific includes South Asia and the Indian Ocean. So, from an American point of view, that does imply elevating India to the status of a rising global superpower able to "contain" China.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson could not have [stated](#) it more bluntly: “The world’s center of gravity is shifting to the heart of the Indo-Pacific. The United States and India – with our shared goals of peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture – must serve as the eastern and western beacons of the Indo-Pacific. As the port and starboard lights between which the region can reach its greatest and best potential.”

Attempts to portray it as a “holistic approach” may mask a clear geopolitical swerve where Indo-Pacific sounds like a remix of the Obama era “pivot to Asia” extended to India.

Indo-Pacific directly refers to the Indian Ocean stretch of the Maritime Silk Road, which as one of China’s top connectivity routes, features prominently in “globalization with Chinese characteristics.” As much as Washington, Beijing is all for free markets and open access to commons. But that must not necessarily imply, from a Chinese point of view, a single, vast institutional web overseen by the US.

## **‘Eurasifrica’?**

As far as New Delhi is concerned, embracing the Indo-Pacific concept entailed quite a tightrope act.

Last year, both India and Pakistan became formal members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is a key element of the Russia-China strategic partnership.

India, China and Russia are BRICS members; the president of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), headquartered in Shanghai, is Indian. India is a member of the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). And until recently India was also participating in BRI.

But then things started to unravel last May, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi refused to attend the BRI summit in Beijing because of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key BRI node that happens to traverse Gilgit-Baltistan and the sensitive region Pakistan defines as Azad Kashmir and India as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

And right on cue, at an African Development Bank meeting in Gujarat, New Delhi unveiled what might be construed as a rival BRI project: the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) – in partnership with Japan. [AAGC](#) could not be more “Indo-Pacific,” actually delineating an Indo-Pacific Freedom Corridor, funded by Japan and using India’s know-how of Africa, capable of rivaling – what else – BRI. For the moment, this is no more than an avowed [“vision document”](#) shared by Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe to do some very BRI-like things, such as developing quality infrastructure and digital connectivity.

And adding to AAGC comes the [Quadrilateral](#), which the Japanese Foreign Ministry spins as projecting “a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific.” That once again pits the “stability of Indo-Pacific region” against Tokyo’s perception of “China’s aggressive foreign policy” and “belligerence in the South China Sea” which imperils what the US Navy always describes as “freedom of navigation”.

As much as Xi and Abe may have recently lauded a new start of Sino-Japanese relations, reality says otherwise. Japan, invoking the DPRK threat but actually fearing China’s fast military modernization, will buy more US weapons. At the same time, New Delhi and Canberra are also quite worried about China’s economic/military onslaught.

Essentially, AAGC and the Quadrilateral link India’s [Act East Policy](#) with Japan’s [Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy](#). Reading these documents in tandem, it’s not far-fetched to qualify the Indo-Japanese strategy as aiming for a “Eurasifrica.”

In practice, apart from the expansion in Africa, Tokyo is also driven to expand infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia in cooperation with India – some in

competition or overlapping with BRI. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), meanwhile, is mulling [alternative financing models](#) for infrastructure projects away from BRI.

As it stands, the Quadrilateral is still a work in progress, with its “stability of Indo-Pacific region” pitted against Beijing’s avowed desire to create a “community with a shared future” in the Asia-Pacific. There are reasons to worry that this new configuration might actually evolve into a stark economic/military polarization of Asia.

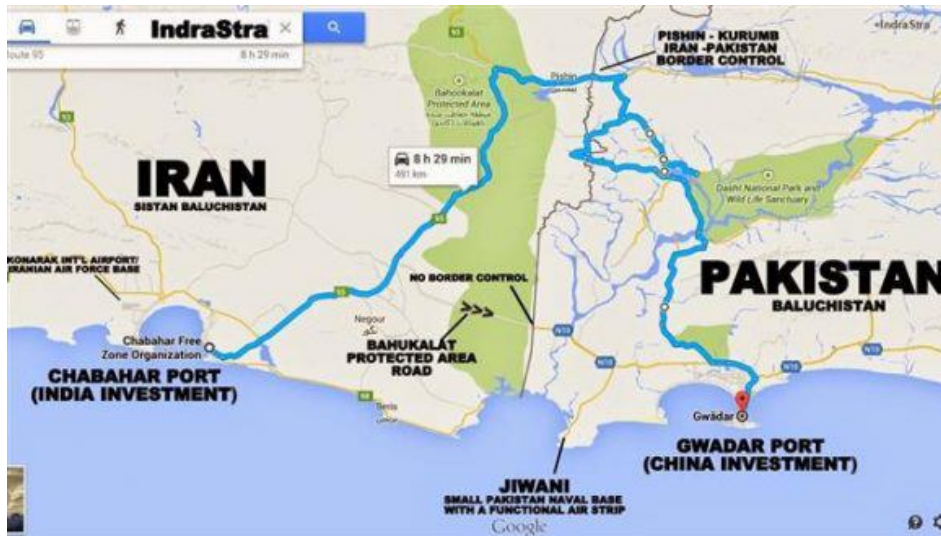
## **A split at the heart of BRICS**

Asia needs a whopping [\\$1.7 trillion in infrastructure projects a year](#), according to the ADB. In theory, Asia as a whole would benefit from an array of BRI projects coupled with some others that are ADB-financed and AAGC-linked.

Considering the extremely ambitious breath and scope of the whole strategy, BRI enjoys a substantial head start. Beijing’s vast reserves are already geared towards investing in Asia-wide infrastructure in tandem with exporting excess construction capacity and improving connectivity all around.

In contrast, New Delhi barely has enough industrial capacity for India’s own needs. In fact India badly needs infrastructure investment; according to an [extensive report](#), India’s needs amount to at least \$1.5 trillion over the next decade. And on top of it India holds a persistent trade deficit with China.

A tangible would-be success is the Indian investment in Chabahar port in Iran as part of an Afghan trade strategy (see part two of this report). But that’s about it.



Apart from energy/connectivity projects such as the national digital ID Aadhaar system (1.18 billion users) and investing in an array of solar power plants, India has a long way to go. According to the recently published Global Hunger Index (GHI), India ranks at 100 out of 119 countries surveyed on child hunger, based on four components: undernourishment, child mortality, child wasting, and child stunting. That's an extremely worrying seven notches below the DPRK. And only seven notches above Afghanistan, at the bottom of the list.

New Delhi would hardly lose if there were a conscious bet on building up on India-China cooperation under the BRICS framework. And that includes accepting that BRI investment is useful and even essential for India's infrastructure development. The doors remain open. All eyes are on December 10-11, when India will host a trilateral Russia-India-China – all BRICS members – at the ministerial level.

<http://www.atimes.com/article/new-great-game-moves-asia-pacific-indo-pacific/>

