

# Exploring the Western Indo-Pacific

## Prospects and Challenges of Engagement with the Western Indo-Pacific Nations

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### A Brief Overview

- On September 2, 2019, the Center for Strategic and Foreign Relations (CSFR) in Vision India Foundation (VIF) hosted a conference “Exploring the Western Indo-Pacific”, focusing on the regions of the Indo-Pacific to the West of India, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This conference was designed to have discussions that highlight and stress the need to have an integrated Indo-Pacific and to highlight India’s strategic interests in the regions to its west.
- Shri Shakti Sinha, the director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), was the keynote speaker for the conference. Shri Sinha presented his views on the conference theme by elucidating about the history of relations that India has had with the countries in the Western IOR. He also elaborated upon India’s current policy of issue-based multi-alignment in matters of foreign policy.
- Commodore Abhay Kumar Singh, a research fellow at the Military Affairs center at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA) chaired the first session in which the panel discussed the subject around extending Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) to the western Indo-Pacific. Ambassador Anil Trigunayat, a member of the Indian Foreign Services (IFS), chaired the second session in which the panel discussed the prospects for collaborative growth and development in the Western Indo-Pacific.
- The conference was attended by professionals, young scholars, students of international affairs, foreign policy, public policy, governance, and economics.

### Opening Remarks and Keynote Address

The conference began with an opening speech by Mr. Shobhit Mathur, the Executive Director of VIF, New Delhi, followed by a keynote speech by Shri Shakti Sinha, the director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi. Shri Sinha spoke extensively about India’s historical relations with the Western Indo-Pacific countries and their evolution throughout the period. While doing so he talked about how, over the years, Indian diaspora has established itself in the gulf countries ranging from manual laborers to trained professionals. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of recognizing India’s issue-based multi-alignment and the subcontinent’s diverse foreign policy. Shri Sinha emphasized having multifaceted relationships with countries in economic, political and security spheres. He further stressed on the upward trajectory of Indo-African relations underlining its co-operative and developmental nature. Finally, he evaluated Chinese presence in the region and discussed its implications on the dynamics of the region.

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## **Extending Free and Open Indo-Pacific to the Western Indo-Pacific**

The first session began with Commodore Abhay Singh's (ret'd) address. He emphasized that India has always had a balanced approach towards both the eastern and the western part of the Indo-Pacific. Commodore Singh moved on to cover aspects of traditional security such as wars between two or more states and of non-traditional security such as piracy and smuggling, and how these two broad aspects of security concerned India and other nations in the Indo-Pacific region. His address emphasized the importance of the choke points like Strait of Hormuz and oil trade between nation-states in the Indo-Pacific.

The first speaker of the inaugural session was Dr Amit Singh from the University of Delhi. He focused on the security of International Shipping Lanes (ISLs) and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the region. Dr. Singh spoke about India's increasing maritime interest encompassing energy security and free and open Sea Lanes/trade routes. Furthermore, he compared the naval capabilities and commands of India on both the eastern and western front and elucidated how the eastern side had better and stronger command in the region. In terms of security, he discussed the effectiveness of the navy and naval command by highlighting its effectiveness in handling the evacuation of Indian citizens from the conflict-torn areas in West Asia. Chinese military and economic presence in the Indian Ocean region was also discussed. Furthermore, he raised security concerns regarding piracy and terrorism. Dr. Singh ended his note by focusing on the need for Indian investment in areas of traditional and non-traditional security in the region.

Professor Harsh Pant using Benedict Anderson's imagined communities explained how the geography of a region, like nation-states, can be imagined and defended. Alluding to the abovementioned argument, he stressed on the need to recognize different conceptions of the Indo-Pacific region and the need to find convergence on the notion of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific. He then spoke about growing Indian importance in the Indo-Pacific region and pointed out the growing convergences between Japan and India vis-a-vis Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). Professor Pant then focused on the significance of energy and oil in India and how India's relations with the Muslim world is fundamental for India's energy security. In challenges confronting Indian foreign policy, Professor Pant specifically focused on the standoff between the US and Iran and its implications for India's interests in the region.

Dr. Pragya Paney presented a comprehensive presentation on India's strategic interests and challenges in the IOR. She spoke extensively about the technical developments and fundamental changes in the Indian Navy that have been designed to increase the

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effectiveness of the Indian Navy. Her presentation highlighted the vitality of the IOR. Agreeing with Commodore Abhay Singh, she elucidated traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the IOR. She argued that the ongoing US-China trade war, rising protectionist policies, and high tariffs, the use of pressure as a political tool and the interplay of predatory economics could lead to new political/diplomatic challenges for India.

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## **Prospects for Collaborative Growth and Development in the Western Indo-Pacific**

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat chaired the second-panel discussion which focused on the prospects for collaborative growth and development in the Western Indo-Pacific. He began the discussion by bringing out the fact that India's definition of the Indo-Pacific is far more inclusive than some other countries. Cultural and regional dissimilarities between countries shape the perceptions and definitions of how each nation might view the Indo-Pacific region. He mapped the whole region out extensively, laying out India's strengths and vulnerabilities. He advocated for conducting Indian foreign policy in a way that strikes a balance between overt balancing of China and acquiescing to Chinese demands. Furthermore, Ambassador Trigunayat spoke about the long-standing relations between India and African nations like South Africa, Mauritius, and Nigeria. These relations, however, have been taken for granted to some extent by India, because of which India lost its lead along the way in being one of the most influential countries in the region. But the mere realization will be instrumental in taking further steps. The importance of the Indian diaspora in African countries that lie in the Western Indo-Pacific region, and issues that come from the fourth generation Indians in the African region were also touched upon in his address. The Indian Diaspora plays a huge role in promoting relations between India and other nations, and are key and important factors in promoting Indian diplomacy and political strategy.

The first speaker in this panel was Professor Sreeram Chaulia, Dean of Jindal School of International Affairs, provided a broad overview of India's economic and infrastructural projects. His note started with analyzing the "Asia" in the Indo-Pacific region. Professor Chaulia then pointed out the similarity between Indian and Japanese approach towards African nations. Professor Chaulia also discussed the challenges India would face if she opened up her industries to foreign players through the reduction of tariffs. The challenges come in two domains – the first being that of challenges due to competition, and the second being that if India doesn't open up her industries, the country is not going to be integrated with what is happening in the outside world, with chances of being left out of major decision-making processes and policies.

Dr Sushmita Rajwar, from Maharaja Agrasen College, Delhi University, discussed the Asia-Africa Growth

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Corridor (AAGC). She discussed Indo–African relationships that have developed around the agenda for growth and development, and possible areas for collaboration between the subcontinent and the African region. Her note began with highlighting the complementary approach of India and Japan towards African states. Asia and Africa share many historical similarities. Dr Rajwar extensively focused on possible areas of collaboration - four possible areas for collaboration were covered. First, "Enhancing Capacity and Skills", through avenues like human resource training, education, pan Africa e-network and through sharing developmental experiences. The second point is that of "Quality Infrastructure and Connectivity" through investing and exploring investment opportunities and through possible areas of collaboration between India and African states like in telecommunication and renewable energy. Third, she focused on collaboration in various fields such as agriculture, health and disaster management. Finally, she focused on "people to people" exchanges, such as education and tourism.

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- i Prashasti Saxena was an intern at the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Relations (CSFR) at Vision India Foundation (VIF). CSFR, VIF thanks Prashasti for making extensive notes at the conference and bringing it out as a report. This report has been edited and structured by Rakshit Mohan, Research Associate, CSFR, VIF.