

PROCEEDINGS ON ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION
EMERGING CHALLENGES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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BY

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A Round Table Discussion was conducted by the CENJOWS on 19 Feb 2018 at Purple Bay to discuss the Emerging Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region. Over 50 officers (serving and retired) from HQ IDS, Services Headquarters, Think Tanks and other organisations attended the event.

Dir CENJOWS welcomed the dignitaries and explained broader contours of the programme. Maj Gen Dipankar Banerjee gave an Indian overview of the Indo-Pacific region. After giving historical perspective of the Indo-US relations, he outlined the emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region in view of the phenomenal and substantial rise of China. He opined that China believes itself to be bestowed with a divine mandate for managing the world affairs keeping barbarian at bay. Domination is considered relevant and important for this purpose. Doklam standoff of 2017 should be seen in this light. A coalition of the forces would be needed for countering China in this region.

Prof Amit Gupta of the US Air War College gave an US overview of the Indo-Pacific region. He observed that uni-polarity prevailed since the end of the cold war but of late China has emerged as an economic dominant power and is a major trading partner of 124 countries whereas US is of only 66 countries. China is holding \$1166 billion US treasury bonds while India is holding only \$135.7 billion. Citing the examples of Philippines and Australia he suggested that the economic clout of China is forcing countries in the region to re-draw their policies in favour of China. He touched upon the relevance of the emerging Quad (US, Japan, Australia and India) for establishing international order in the Indo-Pacific Region and predicted Japan to be the most active member. He recommended linkages with the US for military and with China for economic growth as US remains undisputed military power while China is an economic giant.

Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, Director CENJOWS elaborated the Strategic Interest and Challenges of India. He highlighted the national interests of India and the need for a favourable world order. Talking about India-China border he observed that, this is perhaps the only disputed peaceful border in the world. While, of late China's transgressions were increasing, there is a need to work for maintaining status quo on the border. He opined that in future, China is likely to challenge the US for supremacy and the transition could be violent in which India could be involved as a balancing power. He predicted that the Pakistan will continue its proxy war against India for gaining high impact at least cost which is required to be reversed. China's presence in Pakistan for the CPEC projects is likely to embolden it further and also increase

differences between India and China. He suggested that India should employ “Bind to Balance” approach for looking after its interests. Stable neighbourhood is essential for India to strengthen the regional leader and global player status.

Vice Adm Pradeep Chauhan, Director General NMF talked about Maritime Challenges facing India. He observed that the conceptual challenges being faced in the maritime domain have not been appreciated by the policy makers as their perspective is mainly land based even though India is a geo-strategically and militarily significant maritime power that cannot be ignored, trifled-with, or opposed, without great cost. He emphasized the importance of the security of the SLOCs for uninterrupted trade and commerce activities, so vital for a country like India. He suggested that China will continue its assertiveness as it considers itself a “Middle Kingdom” and is unlikely to be nice to India even if India is nice to her. China is unlikely to match the maritime power of the US in near future and may not be able to match at all the combine maritime power of the Quad countries. Climate change is another area whose effect is likely to affect India’ security by way of exodus of large population from countries like Bangladesh and Maldives who will be worst affected by the climate change. Disputes over maritime boundaries are very likely as baselines and shorelines shift. This will create disagreement over access rights through territorial seas and contiguous zones, and, most especially, over ocean resources in EEZs.

US maritime assessment of the Indo-US was covered by Cdr Lee Donaldson of the US Air War College. He observed that the Chinese maritime activities were expanding more and more and have reached up to Djibouti. China is expanding its naval capability through its state of the arts aircraft carriers and other ships and submarines. US Op area in the Indian Ocean will be building around Diego Garcia. He noted that China was producing naval mines at a very high pace and soon adversaries would be forced to employ more resources for mine sweeping role. More resources would also have to be apportioned for surveillance and reconnaissance purpose.

Role of the PLA and its Navy in the Indo-Pacific Region was explained by the US War College Professor Xiaoming Zhang. He opined that the Chinese interests were in maintaining Communist Party’s existence, protecting China’s sovereignty, integrating Taiwan with the mainland and ensuring its economic development. Indian Ocean is considered more important by China than the US. China has a possibility of going to war with US over ECS, SCS and Taiwan. Border war with India is a possibility. China may have to fight the terrorists in Xinjiang region as well. It is in this light that India is required to devise its strategy toward Indo-Pacific Region.

During the interactive session it emerged that the China-Russia cooperation is unlikely to be significant in the Indo-Pacific Region due mainly to Russia’s major inclination towards its west. Russia’s gas supply to China continues to be most important from Chinese point of view.