



Towards Indo-Pacific Region: Perspective from India

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Abstract

The term “Indo-Pacific” has become centre of global attention in 21st century international politics. It has replaced the term, “Asia-Pacific”. The region has gained interest, and the Indo-Pacific framework has entered the policy discourse among global powers. This paper aims to highlight India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis its cooperation with ASEAN. It also looks at India’s active involvement in the region as a significant power countering China’s rise and expanding influence in the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific, Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific, Act East Policy.*

Introduction

The geopolitical setting quickly and permanently shifted after the end of European colonial empires in Asia. As a result, geopolitics is in progress because great countries cannot build power relations as effectively as they could in the 19th century. Asia is the centre of global political and economic affairs and the birthplace of innumerable civilisations. Thus, international politics has shifted to Asia. The region is where economic influences have a significant impact on world undertakings. Geopolitical and geostrategic variations are still going on in these areas (ASEAN, 2019). Asia-Pacific refers to the portion of Asia that shares a border with the Pacific Ocean. The Asia-Pacific is divided into three parts: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. As a result, the region has become well-known as a centre for growth and innovation. The Asia-Pacific area is a key pillar on which the Indo-Pacific strategy is built.

In the 21st century’s international affairs, the Indo-Pacific region has drawn the interest of major nations. During the Cold War, the region was the neglected side of the world. Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia are all believed to be included in the region, together with the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, Straits of Malacca, South China

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Sea, Taiwan Straits, and the Pacific Ocean. India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is shaped by a new strategic environment created by China's rise, particularly in the Indian Ocean region.

India's "Act East Policy" emphasizes expanding its Pacific neighbourhood. The Indian Ocean to the Western and Southern Pacific saw an increase in India's connections with the East. As China's power grew in the area and its Belt and Road Initiative attempted to create a more Sino-centric global order, India started to imagine a larger neighbourhood. India's interactions with ASEAN have substantially improved after the "Look East Policy" was put into effect. The primary tenets and goals of the "Act East Policy" include expansion of economic ties, forging of cross-cultural relations, and the building of strategic alliances with countries involved in the Indo-Pacific region.

Southeast Asia and India have long-standing economic and cultural ties. Since ancient times, the oceans have played a significant role in connecting India and ASEAN. India and the Southeast shared sea and land borders. In doing so, India strengthened its strategic alliances with Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while also maintaining close ties with all other nations in the Indo-Pacific area. India participates in regional cooperation initiatives such as the Mekong Ganga Cooperation, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. As a result, the relationship between India and ASEAN has expanded in connection to the Indo-Pacific economy.

Geopolitical Profile

The Indo-Pacific is primarily used to refer to the greater Asia-Pacific region, which includes East Asia and the West Pacific. India and the Indian Ocean are included in the Indo-Pacific, which also includes the Asia-Pacific (Bangladesh, Maldives and other Indian Ocean countries). The area is the new element and framework of the seaborne confluence of China, India, and the US as the main powers. The term "Indo-Pacific" has strengthened the previously-standing Asia-Pacific and reinforced India's centrality. The region underlines India and the growing significance of this geographical corridor.

Rory Medcalf defines the region as "The Pacific and Indian Oceans are part of an emerging Asian proactive system characterized in part by China and India's geographical area broadening interests and reach, as well as the United States, continued strategic role and presence in both" (Medcalf, 2012). The region is growing rapidly and enjoys significant esteem throughout the world. In this regard, the oceans are of particular importance. The marine countries of Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, Indonesia, and Indonesia have a great influence on the region (De, 2020). One of the most essential water routes is the Malacca Strait, which links the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (Wintour, 2021). Multilateralism has become crucial among the leading nations to maintain peace and stability in the region as a result of China's influence in the area. To protect economic and political interests, new and reformed strategic alliances are emerging in the Indo-Pacific region.

The term has become more common among observers and practitioners of foreign policy. Shinzo Abe referred to the integration of the Indian and Pacific Seas in his 2007 “Confluence of the Two Seas” (Abe, 2020). As a geographical and geopolitical framework, it has become more significant in the foreign and security policies of major powers including Japan, the United States, Australia, India, France, and several Southeast Asian states. The region has evolved into one where established and developing states compete intensely with one another.

India’s Relations with Pacific Countries

India and Southeast Asia’s connection has improved since the end of the Cold War, progressing from Sectoral Dialogue Partner to Full Dialogue Partner and becoming a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum. After the Cold War ended, India’s “Look East Policy” significantly influenced its international policy. Within a short period, India established ties with an ASEAN member. Upon these instances, India further enhanced its ties with the East Asian countries through its rechristened “Act East Policy”. Gradually, India expanded and improved its regional integration in Asian affairs. It further extended its neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. In the present times, Asia-Pacific has come to be known as Indo-Pacific. Shortly, India has become one of the most trusted partners for a major power in Indo-Pacific affairs. Against the backdrop of the rapidly changing global, regional, and domestic environments, there have been significant growth synergies between the economies of Southeast Asian nations and India since the 1990s. In recent years, India’s ties with Southeast and Northeast Asia have expanded and become more clearly security-focused. As a result of China’s rise and the US rebalancing of Asia, India and the Indo-Pacific region have gained strategic importance in the global community.

The shifting geopolitics in the area demonstrates that the Indo-Pacific has drawn the attention of major world powers like the United States, Japan, China, Australia, and South Korea in terms of economics and security. India has taken on a dominant role in the Indian Ocean due to its strategic location. However, with the growth paths of China in the Indo-Pacific region and the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, it is a crucial task for India to participate in the activities underlying the region. India is seen by a member of ASEAN as a reliable partner to maintain regional peace and stability in the region so that no big power would dominate the region. It is evident that upon the geopolitical churn in the region, it is likely important to uphold regional stability to continue strong linkages within the region. On the other hand, China’s growing concern for the Indian Ocean and Pacific Rims has restored the strategic significance of the area.

Indo-Pacific Region: Indian Perspective

Several dynamic variables are forming the outlines of India’s reestablished Asia-Pacific strategy. The notion is a revised version of the Asia-Pacific region, which is attractive due to the inclusion of the nations of the Indian Ocean in the route of East Asia’s financial activity (Denisov and Paramonov, 2021). India’s efforts to join the Indo-Pacific region were largely influenced by its advantageous location.

When referring to the eastern Indian Ocean outlet, India used the term “Indo-Pacific”. One of the six marine zones surrounding India is specified in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy. It defined the Indo-Pacific as “the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean via the various Indo-Pacific Straits and the South/East China and Philippines Seas” and it is through this region that India is expanding its commitment and relationships to the east under the “Act East Policy” (Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2015). With the end of the Cold War, new geopolitical perspectives that represented the drastically altered global environment started to emerge. In response to a significant shift in India’s outlook on the world after the Cold War, efforts are being made to develop economic and geopolitical ties with Southeast Asia. It was also considered to be an essential component of India’s strategy to open up its economy and leverage the vibrant East Asian area (Joashi, 2021).

In the contemporary era, the region gained dominance with the change in American leadership and the rise of China. India has been ignorant in the past of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and this has remained outside of India’s strategic interests, security architecture and foreign policy engagement. So, India is conscious that it cannot continue to overlook the significance of the maritime domain in its foreign policy approach in the face of China’s military and economic growth in the Indo-Pacific region.

The emergence of the Pacific from an Indian viewpoint could be seen as India’s contemporary version of the LEP. India’s “Act East Policy” as it has been renamed, has helped the country’s ties with Southeast and East Asian nations reach beyond the Malacca Strait. India sees the Indo-Pacific as a large physical and strategic region, with ASEAN serving as a bridge between the two oceans. The “Act East Policy” of India is also focused on expanding economic ties with East Asian and Pacific Island nations as well as Southeast Asian nations. They are both concerned about the Indo-Pacific from a strategic perspective and want to work together to maintain a multipolar regional order based on norms to prevent major powers from gaining control of the region. From India’s perspective on Asia, ASEAN is coming to the forefront, and the future of the Indo-Pacific region is dependent on how well ASEAN emerges. As a result, ASEAN members are believed to have a wide range of common military and non-military risks. To ensure that these dynamics will remain to convey unity, reliability, consistency, and economic success for the participants of Southeast Asia as well as the larger Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean or Indo-Pacific, it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the way in influencing their security and economic facility.

India’s connection with the East has expanded to include the Western and Southern Pacific as well as the Indian Ocean. India has an extraordinary historical and geographic foundation, strong ties to the Indian Ocean’s littoral states, and close ties to the majority of the external countries operating in the region. India’s foreign policy strategy and aims have undergone fundamental change due to the Indo-Pacific. India’s recent actions and rekindled interest in the area are a response to China’s increasing threat and a challenge to its undisputed supremacy in the area. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region offers India some options to investigate and carry out its foreign policy goals. Beijing is imposing regional relativism along its disputed land border with India and at sea. India, a non-aligned nation, is

currently altering its approach in the Indo-Pacific area by letting go of its worry about upsetting Chinese sensibilities and participating in “issue-based alignments” with other players. As a result, like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific are collaborating on a range of unilateral and plurilateral forums to uphold the current international order (Saha and Mishra, 2020).

The extensive maritime landscape of the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and the Arabian Sea is effectively represented by the Indo-Pacific region, which stretches from the shores of Africa to the Americas. The Indo-Pacific is becoming more and more important in regional and global discourses while also coexisting with the region’s tremendous geopolitical turmoil.

In discussions on foreign and security policy, major countries like Japan, the United States, Australia, India, France, and numerous Southeast Asian states have made it an important geographical and strategic idea. It includes all countries that border these oceans, extending from American states like Hawaii and California to foreign territories like American Samoa and Guam in the West Pacific, including the whole Indian Ocean (Department of Defence, Washington, 2019).

As a result, India has many alternatives to consider and pursue its foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. After the end of the Cold War, the Pacific was curbed to a strategic territory. A smaller group, which includes New Zealand, the nations of Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia, among others, has also directed the geopolitical patterns in the Indo-Pacific. The smaller state keeps track of shifts in the global context. The Pacific area has significant cultural and other linkages to New Zealand, a nation that self-identifies as being in it. The nation is a regional power in the South Pacific but a minor one on the world stage. The country is a regional power in the South Pacific, but it is a minor player on the global stage. Similarly, the United States and the European Union are becoming more inclined to work with New Zealand as its priority within Pacific Islands grows. There is a growing realization that the global political centre of gravity has moved to Asia in general, and the Indo-Pacific region in particular.

India’s renewed interest in the Indo-Pacific region is more concerned with developing a response strategy in reaction to China’s rising presence in the Indian Ocean. India’s immediate neighbourhood has seen significant change, and China’s dominant economic presence in the area threatens its status as the region’s primary provider of security. The Maldives and Sri Lanka view India as the dominant force in the area that disregarded their issues and difficulties while effectively controlling the image of the region on the international part. Thus, the absence of strategic rivalry in the region’s direct proximity allowed India to preserve its current situation for many years without ever adjusting its viewpoint or geopolitical policy. India was able to do this and allow its marine policy in the Indian Ocean to become comfortable (Raj, 2020).

India's Engagement in Indo-Pacific Region

India's approach to the region hasn't received much attention in the past, but this is slowly changing. The development also demonstrates how the larger-scale changes in the regional strategic forces brought about by China's and India's ascendancy. Furthermore, there is an increasing effect of military and political ties, which ultimately contributed to the rise of the Pacific region. Due to the rising global economic view of the region, it is thought that it will eventually replace the Atlantic.

However, several variables that affect the region's overall security limit India's participation in the Asia-Pacific. The Indian Ocean acts as an important channel for trade and energy tasks, helping to supply the expanding demand of the major East Asian nations. The Asia-Pacific region, which is bordered by the Pacific and Indian seas as well as several growing economies, including China and India, is expected to play a significant role in global geopolitics and the economy. In the last few years, India has made not only a virtuous start with its Look East Policy but has been taking the initiative regarding the regional economic and security architecture in the Asia Pacific. In reaction to China's growing threat and challenge to its gaping dominance in the region, India has taken action and revived its interest in the region.

An overview of Indian strategy in the Indo-Pacific area is provided by the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. The role of partnership as the primary tenet of India's strategy was at the heart of the address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It was at this point that India's perspective on island nations and strategy in the area underwent a sea change, moving from an inward-looking, reactive approach to an active participation. India has actively promoted a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. With foreign investments moving eastward, such as through the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, as well as the Free Trade Agreements with ASEAN and Thailand, India's trade in this region is expanding quickly (Saha, 2022).

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision serve as the foundation for India's strategy in the region (IPOI). By participating in information sharing and boosting capabilities, India aspires to enhance its relationship with its maritime neighbours on both security and economic level and help them develop their marine security capacities (Bannerjee, 2022). SAGAR occupies a key component in fostering cooperation in addressing issues with ocean resource management in order to support sustainable development in the area. India has benefited from marine development due to its blue economic diplomacy. It launched a blue economic policy to fully exploit maritime resources, outlining its vision and plan for using the vast resources to boost the GDP of the country. Additionally, it launched Sagarmala, a port-led infrastructure with a national view. It is an ambitious initiative that is intended to completely transform India's logistics industry.

India's foreign policy has evolved as a result of a substantially transformed neighbourhood caused by Chinese influence. In the strategic struggle with China's BRI, the

Indian Ocean is increasingly important. It has developed a new marine strategy to maintain its dominance in the region as China increases its influence in the Indian Ocean. In response to this, Beijing is bolstering its defence capabilities by conducting military drills in places like the Taiwan Strait, the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Firstpost, 2021). In the meantime, India has also placed its base at Duqm port to counter Chinese actions.

Regardless of this, security has received most of the attention in the area. Islands like Mauritius, Cocos Keeling, and Andaman & Nicobar offer a strategic setting to confront the new risks and difficulties in the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2021). The most important control point in the Strait of Malacca is Nicobar Island, which may shut off China's imports of oil and trade (which account for 70% of China's oil and 60% of its trade, respectively). Furthermore, India has taken initiatives for creating a transshipment hub in Andaman and Nicobar Island (Hangsing and Muansang, 2022).

Following the Second World War, the island states of Asia separated themselves into subdomains, mainly creating the eastern Indian Ocean and the western Indian Ocean. The shifting security landscape makes cooperation in the Indian Ocean challenging. Subsequently, India assumed the position of the region's principal security provider. China has also established itself as a potent ally for the Indian Ocean's littoral and island nations. Its Maritime Silk Road, which is part of the BRI, has given participants an additional forum for discussing economic and military matters. However, China's increased power in the region has consequently caused concern among other countries, including France and the United States. The larger island states and their allies are expected to pay respect to the nation's security concerns by the big powers. Global politics has raised to the forefront of all investment strategies. BRI cannot be replaced by a single nation, but larger, more developed economies can collaborate to find a solution.

Conclusion

The Indo-geographic Pacific's extent, economic prospects, and strategic orientation are now widely accepted. The region has appeared as a center for both collaboration and competition. Thus, building the economic and security infrastructure of the region is a major task for the Indo-Pacific. The growth of China's economic, political involvement is the most important factor influencing and rearranging the region. Hence, a greater marine connection is crucial for the region's connectivity between India and its trade partners. Improved regional trade and connection via direct maritime and shipping routes, would improve the marine connection between India and ASEAN. India sees the Indo-Pacific region's shifting geopolitics as a chance to highlight its leadership in the neighborhood and its readiness to take charge, in addition to providing cooperative solutions to shared issues. On the other hand, the Indian Ocean has become a key strategic zone surpassing the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as the busiest trade routes in the world. The geographical framework is urgently needed to address the region's security concerns.

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