

Strategic Importance of Indo Pacific: RSTV – Big Picture

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Context:

Indo Pacific is a **decade old concept** which has gained a significant currency recently. It is based on the understanding that the **seemingly diverse** theatres of the **Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean** constitute a **linked strategic theatre** and a **unified strategic heft**.

How did the Term Indo Pacific Gained Currency?

- Countries of a **region** naturally come together to talk about securing certain order and structure for ensuring **peace and security**.
- In a similar fashion, various countries have been using the term Indo Pacific (I.P) in their **official statements**.
- During his visit to Russia, Minister of External Affairs **S Jaishankar** said that I.P is one of the new concepts and approaches thrown up by the **changing world**.
- At the **Shangri La summit** held in 2018, Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** spoke about I.P as a **shared future**.
- Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed the need for safeguarding **freedom of navigation** and **stability** of I.P as he met French President **Emmanuel Macron**.
- A '**Track 1.5**' dialogue was also held between India, France and Australia focused on the identification of security challenges and sustaining issues in the Indo Pacific.
 - Track 1.5 dialogues are conversations that include a mix of government officials—who participate in an unofficial capacity—and non-governmental experts, all sitting around the same table.
- The presence of **four big economies** (USA, China, Japan and India) enhances the importance of Indo Pacific.

What are the different Versions of Interpreting Indo Pacific?

- Indo Pacific (I.P) is **interpreted differently** by different countries. There are mainly three versions to the interpretation:
 1. The **Indian version** views I.P as an **inclusive space** for all stakeholders based on **common responsibilities and common interests**.
 1. India's view on I.P also recognises a strategic interconnection with regard to the **common opportunities and common challenges** shared by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.
 2. **US version** interprets a free and open I.P based on a **rules based order**.
 1. It is little different from the Indian version in such a way that it **excludes any country which**

- doesn't abide by certain rules and expected norms of conduct.
 2. Further, the **US version** of I.P extends from the **Pacific shores of America to the Bay of Bengal** only, while the **Indian version** includes the area up to the shores of **Eastern Africa**.
 3. Not many countries subscribe to this version.
3. A **third version** is one which is interpreted by **ASEAN**, as a model based on consociation, unlike the rules based order prescribed by the US and to some extent by India as well.
 1. Consociation refers to a political system formed by the cooperation of different and opposing social groups on the basis of power sharing.
 2. They argue for the **practical cooperation with China** instead of merely treating it as any other stakeholder.
 3. Since a number of ASEAN countries are economically '**bankrolled**' (financed) by Chinese aids, they are forced **not to make any anti-China position**. Further, China is the largest **trading partner** of ASEAN.
 4. Hence the **cooperative thinking** envisaged by the **ASEAN**, through a 2011 agreement, is **getting eroded**.
 5. **India** emphasises on the **centralism and major role of ASEAN** in the securitisation of I.P with respect to the policy of **Act East**. It is a **countermeasure** to the **geopolitical constraint** India has on its Northern and Western borders, shared with **China and Pakistan**
 6. India is also looking for opportunities of ASEAN as a source of **raw materials** and as a **market** for produced goods.
 7. From a different perspective, **ASEAN** also seems to realise the **need for India to balance China**, particularly in the backdrop of **US withdrawal** from international alliances.
- It can be observed that **Indian version lies at the centre** with the **US and ASEAN** versions at its **right and left**
- India is constantly pursuing to **balance the three narratives** with the support of our engagement with France, Australia, Japan, etc.

Is Indo Pacific a Major Transition of the International Political Order?

- **International Liberal order** led by the **USA** had lasted for around **75 years**.
 - **China** is the **largest beneficiary** of the order in terms of growth in trade and investment.
- The **centre of gravity** of global politics and trade remained across the **Atlantic Ocean** until the beginning of the **Cold War**.
- Later on it was substituted by **Asia Pacific**, which was aimed at excluding Indian interests, particularly in the background of the Cold
- At present, the liberal order is **transforming** itself as countries such as the US is looking differently at the international politics.
- The transition from Asia Pacific into I.P is viewed as the shifting of centre of gravity of international politics **towards Asia**.
- It also signifies a shift in the **Balance of Power and the fulcrum of Geopolitics**.
- **Reasons** behind the shift:
 - To **securitise and to maintain peace and law** abiding nature in the Indian and Pacific Oceans through which majority of world trade occurs. India also backs this cause but never does a 'drum beating' of the same. According to India, the **sea lanes** of I.P are vital for communication and nobody's property.
 - Under the Presidency of Donald Trump, **the US** is showing a '**withdrawal**' tendency with regards to international alliances, sending shivers down the spine of its **traditional allies** such as South Korea, Japan and the ASEAN countries.
 - **China** is emerging as an aggressive player, particularly in the context of changing stand of ASEAN countries.

What are the Cornerstones of India's Vision towards Indo Pacific?

- India's vision towards I.P can be summarised as an '**Open, Integrated, and Balanced**'
 - **Open:** Absence of any **hegemonic power** in the I.P. It is a significant aspect in the context of the **Chinese PLA navy** attempting to replace the **US presence** which was predominant in the region. China has informally established dominance in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean as well.
 - **Integrated:** India aspires to transform a '**divided**' region into an 'integrated' one, particularly in the case of **ASEAN**. It is a countermeasure against Chinese divide and rule policy among ASEAN countries.
 - **Balanced:** India's vision is based on a **multipolar world** (by working with all countries) and a **multipolar Asia** (consisting of India, China, ASEAN, Japan, Australia, etc.). In such an order, no major powers will take over vital economic and trade routes.
- India also wish for the **democratisation** of the region. In the last 10-15 years, the region has transformed from an American lake to a situation of Chinese assertion of power.
 - The **US** had to accept that only a war could dislodge China from the **South China Sea**.
 - US's incapacity on **projecting power, maintaining coalitions and building alliances** has led to a threat of the region becoming a Chinese lake.
- India's approach is also aimed at ensuring the **re-establishment of an older order** in the I.P, which is being destabilised by Chinese assertion.

What are the Views of Other Major Powers towards India's Vision on Indo Pacific?

- The **transition** of terminology from Asia Pacific to I.P is primarily aimed at **including India**.
- It shows that the global community has started to accept **India's norms, salience and emergence** as an important power.
 - In **1999** itself, the then US President **Bill Clinton** expressed that the **21st century** will belong to **India and China** (apart from the USA), a prediction stemming out of conditions prevailing in India.
 - Recently the **US** have renamed their Asia Pacific Command as **Indo Pacific Command**, which is a big transition in terms of military organizations.
 - **India-US relations** has also seen promising growth in the past 20 years, in spite of problems any two big countries would have. However, a similar transition didn't occur in India-China relations despite the continuing efforts by New Delhi.
- Some of the traditional **allies of USA** are looking towards India in order to counterbalance the withdrawal policy of the US. At the same time the US is also searching for other countries to share some responsibilities. Ex.: Talks on the **QUAD**, an informal mechanism between USA, India, Australia and Japan.
- However, most of the **regional powers** such as the USA, Australia, Japan and Indonesia views I.P as merely an addition of India to the Asia Pacific.
 - India is being viewed as an outlier and lays focus on India's role in the **maritime domain** awareness in Asia Pacific only. Ex.: South China Sea and East China Sea.
 - However, India's view of self is based on one **combined theatre** of Indian and Pacific Oceans, in which it is calling for attention towards Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean region as well.

What are the Threats Posed by China in Indo Pacific?

- China is a '**power player**' in international diplomacy and it threatens the political order in the region.
- China is asserting itself in the I.P by supplying **military equipment** to Bangladesh, Thailand (three submarines), Myanmar, Sri Lanka (frigate), etc.
- China **claims** that they are **rising in a peaceful way**, however they fail to address the concerns of

regional countries emerging out of a **lack of transparency** in their functioning. One doesn't know what will be the next move of China.

- China is also **accused of colonising** the region as illustrated by the **rising debts** of those countries which took loans from China and cultural issues raised by the locals of **Hambantota** in Sri Lanka (where Chinese is funding a strategically important port) and the unlawful ingress into **Myanmar**.
- Chinese policy is popular for **uncertainty and swinging from one extreme to another** swiftly, as evident from their slogan "**Let a hundred flowers bloom**" followed by a cultural revolution.
- : In 2012, **Scarborough shoal** in the South China Sea was invaded and barricaded by China in spite of **Philippine's claims** and **US de marche** (diplomatic move) against it. But the Chinese didn't budge and still controls the shoal, posing with a hegemonic threat.

What are the Other Challenges and Threats?

- Challenges in the I.P are not just about securing **trade routes** from domination of a particular country.
- **Terrorism** is a huge threat, particularly for India. A hotbed for terrorism is operating at regions in vicinity to I.P, which is probably admitted by even Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- **Maritime security** and maritime domain awareness are also central to the concept of I.P.
- There exists a **political rhetoric** describing the I.P as an **arc of prosperity** where everyone can work together. While political focus is centred on such opportunities, it often **detracts from the real issues** such as countering the Chinese assertion.
- India is working towards a **multipolar world order** and a resolution of like-minded countries to counter anyone who may challenge a multipolar world. However, a large portion of the international community is wary of such a resolution which resembles a cold war mentality (such as NATO and Warsaw pact).
- India also envisions an international order which is **rule bound**. But there are worries regarding countries that challenge the order by use of force and power.

Is there a Need for India to focus more on Operational Challenges in the Indo Pacific?

- China's assertive moves in the region is a **geopolitical and geo-economic reality**. In Cold War terminology, it necessitates **counter balancing and containment of China** as an inevitable part of I.P strategy.
- There are various opinions regarding India's response:
- **No, India need not focus on such challenges.**
 - According to Minister of External Affairs **S Jaishankar**, the version subscribed by US etc. about containing China is based on a **Cold War mentality**.
 - He also stated that India is looking for **opportunities** to work together with China and other stakeholders.
 - At the most, India's strategy views China as more of a **challenge than a threat**.
 - India and China share the table in associations such as **BRICS, Russia-India-China Trilateral (RIC), East Asia Summit (EAS)**, etc.
 - In many issues such as impacts of **globalisation, climate change**, etc. India and China have **similar interests**, especially in the backdrop of US's withdrawal tendency.
 - An upcoming summit in Russia aimed at **Eurasian Economic Cooperation** also reiterates that India is looking more towards opportunities rather than challenges.
- **Yes, India need to counter balance such challenges.**
 - There is potential for India with respect to forming **minilateral and trilateral partnerships** such as **India-France-Australia** and **India-Australia-Indonesia** (Indonesia is a central player within the ASEAN). **Minilateralism** is a diplomatic dialogue by a group of countries on specific topics.
 - Recently inked strategic partnerships with **Japan**, a similar one proposed with **South Korea** and bilateral partnerships with ASEAN countries such as **Vietnam** reiterates the need for

counterbalancing.

- India is also expected by **smaller countries in the region** to step up and help them in economic and military terms, as a counterbalance against China.

What are the Future Prospects for India with Respect to Indo Pacific?

- **Naval forces** and **diplomacy** are two vital tools for furthering India's stature in the affairs of Indo Pacific. Both the tools allows India to influence events far away from our borders.
- New Delhi is required to leverage the **already strong relations in trade and commerce** to formulate **minilateral diplomacy, blue water policy** and deeper economic integration through **Free Trade Agreements** (FTAs). All such pieces are required to complete the open, integrated and balanced picture of Indo Pacific.
- If we could achieve an **open, integrated and balanced Indo Pacific**, our power projection and influence in the region will increase tremendously.
- India's vision of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)**, upon which schemes like Sagarmala is founded, need to be leveraged for growing international confidence over India's role in Indo Pacific.

Conclusion:

- Indo Pacific is a strategic space which offers a number of challenges and opportunities for India and all other stakeholders. Appropriate diplomatic manoeuvring and economic and military assertion is vital for the implementation of India's interests in the region along with leveraging the space as a building block for a multipolar world order.