



Demystifying the Magnetic Drag of the Indo-Pacific Region

The tides and currents of the Indo-Pacific have alerted the major economic and political powerhouses of the world about the relevance of safety and security in the region in every sense. Almost every nation is now pondering and diving deep into the strategic depths to frame the geoeconomic policies and geostrategic plan of actions that suit their nation vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific region. This article forms an opinion about the relevance of the Indo-Pacific, the geopolitical shifting of gears in the region, and further attempts to understand the new maritime challenges, the strategic policies of various nations, and how India's strategic plan of action can act as the best way forward in the Indo-Pacific region.



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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region is an extensive maritime zone that stretches out from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of America with an amalgamation of two oceans, i.e., the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, plus the landmasses around these oceans. The economic and strategic significance of this vast region lies in the fact that it is home to more than 64 percent of the global population and contributes to over 60 percent of the global GDP; almost 50 percent of the global trade passes through this maritime route; and close to 90 percent of India's trade travels through these water lanes. "Over the years, this region has seen strong and sustained economic growth spreading across the Pacific rim, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Gulf region, and the East and Southern Coast of Africa." (Dr. S. Jaishankar, MEA) The shift in economic and geopolitical trajectory from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific has gained currency in the last few years with respect to the security, stability, peace, and prosperity of this region, which is vital for the whole world. The relevance of the Indo-Pacific has become more crucial as this maritime trade route connects Europe and the Persian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean via the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. Since the last few decades, this region has turned itself into the centre stage of global trade, commerce, and economic prosperity for the nations located in this region and around the globe. The centre of economic gravity has shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as some of the world's biggest economies are situated in this region, namely: China, India, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In addition, six members of the G20 (Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea) are also located in this region. The region's graph is pointing towards the North with respect to every passing day in terms of trade, commerce, energy, demography and biodiversity, which positions the Indo-Pacific at the vanguard of globalisation.

Why a Geopolitical shift ?

The term Indo-Pacific defines the geographical vastness of the new maritime domain, as this region is the world's third-largest oceanic division, which covers nearly 20 percent of the water on the earth's surface and has the capacity to alter Asia's future in favour of her giants, be it economically, politically, or militarily. In the past two decades, this region has become the new driver of global economic growth. According to the IMF, the Indo-Pacific region could represent more than 50 percent of global GDP in 2040, and its markets could represent 40 percent of global consumption. Growth in the Indo-Pacific region is supported by a dynamic middle class that prefers high-quality goods and services, resides in urban areas, is easily connected, as 21 out of the 30 largest cities are in the Asian subcontinent, and will soon represent three billion people in Asia. These urban ecosystems have become hubs of innovation, giving birth to modern, inclusive, and more sustainable cities. However, currently, this region is witnessing profound strategic modifications due to several reasons: 1. China is flexing its muscle power in Asia by increasing its territorial claims. 2. Growing competition between China and the U.S. 3. Tensions between India and China due to conflict 4. Issue of the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula and certain other issues like piracy; terrorism; trafficking (drugs, precious stones and wood, protected species, illegal fishing and impact of climate change have a direct impact on the entire region. All these elements are reasons for changing regional dynamics and the balance of power.

Tangled and strategic issues engulfing the Indo-Pacific region

China is flexing its muscles in multiple ways, for instance, in the South China Sea through territorial advances and growing strides in South Asian waters vis-à-vis a string of ports across the Indian Ocean as well as the Belt and Road

Initiative, which further highlights the Chinese plan to bind the geopolitical space and combat the climate crisis. The Red Dragon is monitoring India's engagement through strategic dialogues, military exercises, and security agreements with other Indo-Pacific nations. It's military buildup in the South China Sea, territorial and maritime boundary disputes of China with Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei and sweeping territorial claims across the strategic waterways, military modernisation and economic integration have emerged across the region (external commercial footprints) and have remapped regional and global politics. A major threat perception enveloping the Indo-Pacific is the rise of a hegemonic China with unilateral tendencies. Additionally, China's \$60 billion investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor may lead Pakistan to mortgage land and project space in and around Gwadar port, as China had adopted a similar strategy of construction projects in the Maldives as well, which it could not afford. Considering China's policies and the threats it poses in the Indo-Pacific Region, a report titled "*The Elements of the China Challenge*", published by the office of the Secretary of State of the U.S. highlights how China is engulfing developing countries across Asia and Africa in a debt trap in the name of Chinese assistance. "America also believed that China's growing economic prosperity would inevitably lead to greater democratisation of the society. China, however has steadily moved in the opposite direction." (C Raja Mohan). Strategic policies have been devised by some major economies, political powerhouses, and multilateral groups to spread their presence and secure the sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific region.

European Union (EU): The EU has become more appreciative of the changing Indo-Pacific strategic dynamics and has devised an "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific." The strategic plan has identified seven key areas for action, which include: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security. This strategic policy is a step to curb the rise of China, which is becoming a critical element with respect to current global and regional uncertainties. China's leading and dominant role in trade, technology, military power, and the economic developments in the Asian region impacts the commercial growth of the EU. Henceforth, countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands have come up with national Indo-Pacific strategies.

United States (US): The United States knows the maritime importance the Indo-Pacific region holds as it spans over two oceans and several continents, and therefore, it has renamed its, Pacific Command to the S. Indo-Pacific Command. Moreover, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of (2018) highlights serious engagement within the Indo-Pacific. A report published by the U.S. "*Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*" states that "U.S. is committed to





an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. To realise that future, the United States will strengthen our own role while reinforcing the region itself. The essential feature of this approach is that it cannot be accomplished alone, changing strategic circumstances and historic challenges require unprecedented cooperation with those who share this vision.” The most critical challenge in maintaining the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region is the aggressive behaviour of China, which is pushing its territorial claims in the maritime as well as in the continental domain. Hence, to provide security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S has come up with five objectives each in cooperation with its allies, partners and regional institutions: First: Advance, free and open Indo-Pacific; Second: To connect both within and outside the region; Third: Drive regional prosperity; Fourth: Bolster Indo-Pacific security and Fifth: Build regional resilience to transnational threats. The growing economic influence of China and its strategic consequences for smaller nations in the Indo-Pacific region are serious concerns. China-funded infrastructure projects and debt obligations are gradually pushing the receiving nations towards the door of a debt trap. Therefore, the U.S. has stated that “we will work with partners to stand up to economic coercion.” moreover, criminal threats are becoming more common in the Indo-Pacific, thus threatening the maritime security of the region. Hence, the U.S, the Quad, and other Indo-Pacific states are actively enhancing maritime awareness in the region. In 2022, an initiative led by U.S. President Joe Biden known as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) came up with an idea to promote a free and open Pacific with its regional partners and allies. It will provide real time maritime awareness to the connected regional partners and allies with the help of American technological innovations and this would be the first instance wherein U.S. has involved nations of the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and Indian Ocean region in a single framework. IPMDA will improve the capacity to protect the waters and resources vital to Indo-Pacific economies and will create a deterrent for unlawful Chinese maritime activities. Secondly, U.S. has jointly launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with other partner countries of the Indo-Pacific region. The 14 member IPEF represents 40 percent of global GDP and 28 percent of global goods and services trade. It seeks to strengthen economic cooperation among participating countries in order to improve the region’s resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness. Lastly, another initiative of the U.S. (Build Back Better World) B3W is envisioned to find a better and more sustainable alternative to Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through B3W, the G7 and other like-minded partners will coordinate in mobilising private-sector capital in four areas namely: climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality. B3W will stretch from Latin America and the Caribbean to Africa and the Indo-Pacific.

Japan: According to this island nation it, “aims to promote peace, stability and prosperity across the region to make the Indo-Pacific free and open as “international public goods”, through rules-based international order, rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and promotion of free trade.” Japan has devised three pillars to support the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific; first, promotion and establishment of the rule of law; freedom of navigation and free trade; second, pursuit of economic prosperity by improving connectivity and strengthening economic partnership through investment treaties; and third, commitment to peace and stability through capacity building in maritime law enforcement, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief cooperation. Japan’s idea is “to enhance “connectivity” between Asia and Africa through a free and open Indo-Pacific and, with ASEAN as the hinge of two oceans, promote stability and prosperity of the region.”

France: The only EU member state that maintains a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific region is France, which includes: La Réunion and Mayotte, New Caledonia and French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories. More than 90 percent of the French EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) is located in the Indo-Pacific, of which approximately 60 percent is in the Pacific, mainly around French Polynesia. The France (French) Indo-Pacific strategy aims to maintain an open region free of any form of coercion and based on the rule of international law and multilateralism. Hence, French Indo-Pacific strategy is based on five main objectives; First, ensuring and defending the integrity and sovereignty of France, protection of its citizens, territories, and EEZ. Second, contributing to the security of regional areas by promoting military and security cooperation. Third, preserving, alongside its partners, access to common areas in a context of strategic competition and increasingly restrictive military environments. Fourth, participating in the maintenance of strategic stability and the military balance of power through international action based on multilateralism and fifth, anticipating security risks brought about by climate change.

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Its perspective on the Indo-Pacific is structured to enhance and strengthen existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to face tough challenges and seize the opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments, rather than creating new techniques or replacing the existing ones. It works on the principle of promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), which can serve as a platform for dialogue and the implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation. The vision of ASEAN consists the following key elements: firstly, a perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role, secondly, in the region of dialogue and cooperation instead



of rivalry, thirdly, region of development and prosperity for all and finally, the importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture.

India: The mother of democracy, whose Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi in 2018 articulated India's perspective for the Indo-Pacific region at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, and stated that; "India calls for a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific, based upon respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and adherence to international rules and laws. India's concept of the Indo-Pacific is inclusive in nature and supports an approach that respects the right to freedom of navigation and overflight for all in the international seas." It is based upon the principles of ASEAN centrality, cooperation and collaboration. To further concretise India's vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, additionally, the PM in 2019 came up with the idea of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Thailand. IPOI advocates an open, inclusive, non-treaty-based global initiative for mitigating challenges, particularly in the maritime domain, through mutual coordination and respect. This global initiative is based on seven pillars: 1. Maritime security 2. Maritime ecology 3. Maritime resources 4. Resource sharing and Capacity building 5. Disaster risk reduction and management 6. Science, technology and academic cooperation 7. Trade, connectivity and maritime transport. India's Indo-Pacific strategy has two components: Strengthening its national engagement with the region, and stronger partnerships with like-minded nations. The former elevates India's eminence in the Indo-Pacific region while the latter focuses on coalitions and partnerships that will boost India's national capabilities to further enhance its strategic influence. Even the new Indo-Pacific strategy document issued by the Biden administration remarks that: "We will continue to build a strategic partnership in which the United States and India work together and through regional groupings to promote stability in South Asia; collaborate in new domains, such as health, space, and cyberspace; deepen our economic and technology cooperation; and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific. We recognise that India is a like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active in and connected to Southeast Asia, a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora, and an engine for regional growth and development." India, as a democratic nation, has devised various forums like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and IPOI to endorse for a free and open Indo-Pacific. India's engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners is based on multiple platforms, like bilateral, plurilateral, or multilateral, and a host of other domains, like the blue economy, maritime connectivity and security, disaster management, and capacity building. In the present-day world, India plays a defining strategic role in the Pacific, EastAsia, and Southeast Asia.

South Korea: The "Republic of Korea" (ROK) has recently unveiled its blueprint for the Indo-Pacific region. ROK's report titled "*Strategy for a free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*" states that it will proceed with the



special strategic partnership and economic ties with India, as India is a “leading regional partner with shared values. India presents great potential for growth, having the world’s second largest population and cutting-edge IT and space technologies. We will increase strategic communication and cooperation through high-level exchanges in foreign affairs and defence, while strengthening the foundation for enhanced economic cooperation by upgrading the ROK-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).” In 2018, South Korea became a member of IORA (the Indian Ocean Rim Association) as a dialogue partner and joined SAARC in 2006.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD): A four-nation strategic dialogue between the United States, India, Japan and Australia was initiated in 2007. It is a diplomatic and military arrangement in response to increased Chinese economic and military power and to fight China’s expanding power in the Indo-Pacific region. The ultimate aim of QUAD members is to maintain free and open Indo-Pacific, rule based maritime order in the East and South China sea and to keep the Indo-Pacific sea routes cushioned from any military or political influence. The coalition also aims to offer alternative debt financing for nations in the Indo-Pacific region and exchange views on contemporary global issues such as emerging technologies, infrastructure, cyber and maritime security, education, connectivity, climate change, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.

Important exercises to secure the sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific

1. Malabar: A quadrilateral exercise between Japan, India, Australia and the U.S. in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans with an aim to uphold and reinforce the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.
2. La Perouse: A five nation (Japan-France-U.S.-Australia-India) multilateral exercise hosted by France in the Bay of Bengal. To uphold and reinforce the Free and Open Indo-Pacific as well as strengthen cooperation and unity among the five nations who share fundamental values.
3. Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD): Training exercises with the navies of major European nations deployed in the Indo-Pacific region.
4. Cope North: Japan-U.S.-Australia trilateral exercise/humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief training to improve response capabilities and interoperability between Japan, the U.S. and Australia, as well as to uphold and reinforce the free and open Indo-Pacific vision.
5. Christmas Drop: In the Federated States of Micronesia regions to promote better relations with Pacific Island nations in order to uphold and reinforce the free and open Indo-Pacific.
6. AUSINDEX: A naval exercise conducted by India and Australia to strengthen joint capabilities in support of a stable and secure Indo-Pacific region.

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“India calls for a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific, based upon respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations

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India’s blue print to present itself as a global leader in the 21st Century vis-à-vis Indo-Pacific

SAGAR a “consultative, democratic and equitable” doctrine that works with regional organisations like BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), ASEAN and IORA (the Indian Ocean Rim Association) to promote cooperation and create an environment of peace and stability. It associates naval security with economic development and emphasises the significance of coast guard agencies in littoral states for counter-piracy actions by non-state actors. It will enhance collaboration in trade, tourism, and infrastructure with respect to climate change issues and also promote sustainable development in the region. The SAGAR doctrine is a proactive foreign policy and a strategic move to guard India’s national interests by enhancing its bilateral ties with IOR littoral states. Secondly, Sustainable Development Goals and Rule-Based Order at Sea support India’s indispensable role of inclusive growth in the Indo-Pacific region. India’s focus on the blue economy, sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem is a progressive step towards leading the world in the right direction. Thirdly, India’s aim to become a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region has initiated with the following steps: A. exported the first “Made in India” warship to Mauritius, B. To participate in building coastal surveillance networks in the Seychelles, Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, C. Aims to expand its reach to other South-East Asia and Africa nations. Fourthly, India has made extensive efforts to promote its “Act East Policy” and considers ASEAN countries as a milestone for promoting regional cooperation. The relations between China and some East Asian countries in the South China Sea are turning sour. Hence, India can encash this opportunity to intermediate and promote maritime cooperation. Fifthly, India’s approach

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area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure augments such efforts, along with those of the International Solar Alliance targeted towards renewable energy. India has collaborated with its partners in the Indo-Pacific and Quad to fight the pandemic and there is a huge potential to further strengthen this cooperation in coming years. Seventh, Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD), an international annual conference of the Indian Navy, reviews opportunities and challenges that arise within the Indo-Pacific. Finally and most importantly, the Ministry of External Affairs has created a new division, the Oceania Division, to focus exclusively on South-East Asian nations, Pacific Island states, and the larger Indo-Pacific, a harbinger that highlights the government's focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

Way Forward

The rising importance of the Indo-Pacific is clear from the geoeconomic currents and shifting geostrategic gears, as evidenced by precedents of country-specific policies like China's "Belt and Road initiative" India's "Act East Policy" United States "Rebalance/Pivot to Asia" and Japan's idea of "Confluence of the Two Seas." These policies will play a proactive role in the Indo-Pacific region. The security concerns have prompted new security partnerships among the major countries to secure the sea lanes. India, Japan, and the United States have adopted a "Trilateral Partnership" with respect to their mutual interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The three nations mentioned above are currently facing the common China challenge, and thus, the central goal is to forge a partnership to maintain and secure maritime lanes through joint efforts based on shared support for peace, democracy, prosperity, and a rules-based international order. It is in this Indo-Pacific region that more than 40 percent of the global seaborne trade passes through the Strait of Malacca and the global oil trade through the Gulf of Hormuz, Malacca, and Singapore straits. Henceforth, in light of this large volume of trade, the need of the hour is to make these sea lanes more safe and secure.

Recently, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Lestari Priansari Marsudi remarked, "strategic trust is one of the key aspects of building bridges in the Indo-Pacific region and making the region peaceful and stable." While applauding "Building Bridges in the Indo-Pacific" the theme of Delhi Dialogue XII, she said, "We need to build bridges in all regions including in the Indo-Pacific. Building bridges means narrowing gaps, overcoming differences, connecting countries and improving relations. However, we won't be able to build bridges if there is no trust among each other. We will not be able to build bridges if the trust deficit persists. Therefore, one thing we need before we build bridges is to nurture strategic trust to manage the strategic competition."

Conclusion

Indeed, global commons are of great significance, and in present times, the Indo-Pacific is a global common full of untapped potential. This region contains the world's most crucial sea routes and most populous nations. This multiplier region is adjudged to be the centre of the globe in terms of politics, economics and population, and it contributes more than half of the world's GDP. The motivation for a larger bloc always comes from the expanse, resources, scope, and size of the economy it can generate. This is, in fact, a region in which several Asian powers are rising once again, especially in geoeconomic terms. To unlock this potential, the need of the hour is to deploy the right paradigm of collaboration as we deal with global issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, food and fertiliser shortages, the energy crisis, supply chain issues, and finances.

"Indo-Pacific region was an inalienable part of our existence. It has been our lifeline, and also the highway for trade and prosperity." PM Narendra Modi. ■

towards Indo-Pacific under the IPOI is to establish a safe, secure and stable maritime domain. "India's IPOI does not envisage a new institutional framework but will rely on the Leaders-led East Asia Summit process, its framework and its activities." (Dr. S. Jaishankar). Subsequently, few East Asian Summit countries have shown their interest in leading various pillars of the IPOI for instance, Australia will lead on Maritime Ecology, Japan on Connectivity, Indonesia and France on Marine Resources, Singapore on the Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation and United Kingdom on Maritime Security. Sixth, India has also established itself as an early responder in the