

THE RISE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC: INDIA'S VISION, GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

The term "Indo-Pacific" is taking the place of "Asia-Pacific" as a framework for organizing the regional order. In the ongoing effort to define the concept of Asia, this broader label carries strategic implications for handling China's ascent while also incorporating the United States into an all-encompassing region. Various leaders have introduced fresh terminology, such as "Act East" and the "confluence of two seas," signifying a maritime super-region with its central point in Southeast Asia. This region serves as the crossroads of interests for at least four major powers, as well as significant middle powers. The scale of the Indo-Pacific reduces any single country's ability to unilaterally shape the regional order. The economic and strategic interconnectedness of this expansive region spanning two oceans results in both mutual benefit and mutual vulnerability. After being set aside for eleven years, the Indo-Pacific concept has made a powerful resurgence in discussions on regional security.

The four countries advocating for the "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept share several core principles, including the promotion of freedom of navigation and overflight, connectivity and economic growth, and respect for the rule of law. However, there are notable differences among them, resulting in distinct Indo-Pacific strategies within this group. Even if the Indo-Pacific Four manage to address these differences (which is unlikely), it's improbable that ASEAN would endorse the FOIP concept. The fact remains that Indonesia and ASEAN have taken a distinct approach to the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN's approach involves adopting elements of the FOIP strategy that align with its interests, such as connectivity and infrastructure, while rejecting aspects that it deems unsuitable, like the exclusion of China and the diminishment of ASEAN's central role. This suggests that the complete adoption of the FOIP concept by ASEAN is unlikely.

The term "Indo-Pacific" is a relatively recent concept, having gained importance in the past 10 years. Its popularity stems from the recognition that the region of both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are intricately connected within the realm of strategic affair

Additionally, the epicenter of global influence has switched to Asia due to the critical role played by maritime routes, particularly the maritime routes in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, through which the bulk of the world's trade flows.

The Indo-Pacific region represents one of the most densely populated and economically vibrant areas globally, encompassing multiple continents: Asia, Africa, Australia, and America. Its vitality and vigor are evident, boasting 60% of the world's population and contributing to two-thirds of the global economic output, solidifying its status as a crucial global economic nexus. Additionally, the region plays a substantial role as both a source and destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), with numerous vital and extensive supply chains intricately linked to the Indo-Pacific.

The Indian and Pacific Oceans, when combined, hold vast reservoirs of marine resources, comprising offshore hydrocarbons, sea-dredged minerals, methane hydrates, and rare-earth minerals. Substantial coastlines and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) equip coastal nations with significant advantages in harnessing these valuable resources.

Furthermore, a number of the world's largest economies, such as India, the United States, China, Japan, and Australia, are located within the Indo-Pacific region.

Collaboration with Other Nations for a Security Framework: Several of India's key allies, including the USA, Australia, Japan, and Indonesia, seek India's involvement in regions like the South China Sea and East China Sea to act as a counterbalance to China's influence. However, India's primary objective is to foster cooperation in establishing a peaceful and secure regional architecture. Achieving common prosperity and security necessitates dialogue to develop a shared rules-based framework for the region.

Expansive Reach of the Indo-Pacific: From India's perspective, the Indo-Pacific represents a vision of an open, inclusive, and free region, encompassing all nations within its geographical scope and any others with a vested interest. In geographical terms, India considers this area to extend from the African shores to the American shores.

Equitable Participation in Trade and Investment: India advocates for a friendly environment for trade and investment in the Indo-Pacific Region that is rooted in rules, openness, balance, and stability, benefiting all nations through increased trade and investment. This mirrors the expectations India holds for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Unified ASEAN Focus: In contrast to China, India advocates for a united ASEAN rather than one that is fragmented. China's approach involves creating divisions among ASEAN members, essentially employing a 'divide and conquer' strategy.

Collaborative Approach with China: India diverges from the U.S.-centric vision of the Indo-Pacific, which seeks to limit Chinese influence. Instead, India seeks avenues for cooperation with China.

Opposition to Single Dominant Power: India strives for the democratization of the region. Previously, the Indo-Pacific was predominantly under American influence, but there is a concern that it might become a Chinese-dominated sphere. India rejects the idea of any one player having hegemony in the region.

Theatre of Geo-Strategic Contest: The Indo-Pacific serves as the primary arena for geo-strategic competition among various multilateral institutions, including QUAD and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

China's Militarization Efforts: India faces a challenge to its interests and stability in the Indian Ocean from China. India's neighboring countries receive military and infrastructure support from China, including submarines and frigates to Myanmar and Sri Lanka, respectively., and China's overseas military base in Djibouti (Horn of Africa). Additionally, China maintains control over Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, situated just a short distance from India's coastline.

Hub for Non-Traditional Concerns: The vastness of the region presents difficulties in assessing and addressing various non-traditional risks, such as piracy, trafficking, and terrorism. In the Indo-Pacific region, there are substantial hurdles stemming from geographical and ecological instability induced by climate change, compounded by the repercussions of 3 consecutive La Niña events, resulting in tsunamis and cyclones. Furthermore, issues like illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) aquatic pollution and fishing are detrimental to the marine life in this area.

India's Constrained Naval Capacity: The Indian Navy faces limitations in terms of resources and capabilities, primarily due to the restricted allocation of funds within the budget of Indian military forces.

Additionally, the absence of overseas military bases presents a fundamental logistical challenge for India in maintaining a substantial existence in the Indo-Pacific region.

India's maritime strategy

India's maritime strategy, objectives, and vision are primarily centered on utilizing its extensive coastline and strategically advantageous geographical location to stimulate economic growth, bolster national security, and enhance its influence within the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The maritime policy of India encompasses several key components:

Sagar Mala Project: The Sagar Mala Project serves as a flagship initiative with the aim of modernizing and optimizing the nation's ports and logistics infrastructure. It is planned to promote development driven by ports, reduce logistical expenses, and bolster trade.

Blue Economy: India is actively pursuing its Blue Economy policy, seeking to harness its maritime resources for sustainable economic advancement. This includes activities such as fisheries, aquaculture, renewable energy, and coastal tourism.

Security and Defense: Safeguarding India's maritime interests and securing its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) stands as a crucial facet of the maritime policy. The Indian Navy plays a pivotal role in ensuring maritime security, with India's Maritime Doctrine outlining the guiding principles and strategies for this purpose.

Act East Policy: India's maritime policy aligns with its broader foreign policy objectives, including the Act East Policy, which aims to strengthen connections with nations in the Indo-Pacific region and leverage maritime connectivity for trade, investment and security cooperation.

Vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): India aspires to be a responsible participant in the IOR, with a commitment to advancing peace, stability, and economic progress while addressing security challenges.

International Collaborations: India actively engages in maritime cooperation and partnerships with a variety of nations and international organizations. It is involved in initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and collaborates with countries like the USA, Japan, and Australia to enhance maritime security and foster development in the Indo-Pacific. **Infrastructure Enhancement:** Enhancing maritime infrastructure, encompassing ports, shipbuilding, and ship repair facilities, constitutes a pivotal element of the strategy to boost trade and economic activities.

Environmental Stewardship: India's maritime policy recognizes the implication of environmental sustainability and points to tackle issues like marine pollution, climate change, and the responsible utilization of maritime resources.

Exploration and Research: The policy advocates for the advancement of marine research and exploration, encompassing deep-sea mining and the exploration of marine biodiversity. **Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power:** India leverages its maritime heritage and culture as a component of its soft power diplomacy, fostering stronger cultural and economic bonds with countries along the Indian Ocean rim.

India's maritime policy is multifaceted, with a central emphasis on achieving a harmonious balance between economic growth, national security, and sustainable development, all while actively participating in regional and global maritime affairs.

India's Vision for Indian Ocean

India's perspective regarding the Indian Ocean is firmly rooted in the pursuit of a tranquil, prosperous, and secure maritime expanse. India envisions itself as a conscientious and influential actor in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), guided by a set of fundamental principles:

Security and Stability: India's foremost objective is to ensure the stability and security of the Indian Ocean. This is achieved through regional cooperation, the cultivation of trust among coastal states, and the mitigation of maritime threats such as piracy and terrorism.

Economic Prosperity: The vision places a significant emphasis on transforming the Indian Ocean region (IOR) into an economic epicenter. It endeavors to boost investment, trade, and regional connectivity by participating in initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) approach.

Environmental Sustainability: India is deeply committed to preserving the marine environment, combatting climate change, and safeguarding the rich biodiversity of the Indian Ocean. This involves the responsible management of aquatic resources and the mitigation of pollution.

Cultural and People-to-People Connections: India seeks to fortify cultural and people-to-people bonds across the Indian Ocean, leveraging its historical ties and maritime heritage to nurture closer relationships with neighboring nations. **Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagement:** India actively participates in diplomacy and multilateral forums, including dialogues with Indian Ocean countries, to promote collective security and economic development in the region.

Balanced Power Dynamics: India's vision underscores the relevance of a multipolar and equitable power structure in the Indian Ocean, where no single nation exerts dominance. India advocates for comprehensive regional security arrangements. **Maritime Connectivity:** India's vision encourages the enhancement of maritime connectivity, infrastructure development, and economic integration among Indian Ocean nations, fostering an environment for mutual growth and development.

India's vision for the Indian Ocean extends beyond safeguarding its own interests; it also entails contributing to the overall well-being of the entire region. It aspires to create a harmonious environment where nations collaborate to harness the vast potential of the Indian Ocean while jointly addressing common challenges.

Prime Minister Speech and India's vision

In March 2015, during a speech delivered in Mauritius, India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined his vision for the IOR, encapsulated in the acronym "SAGAR," which stands for "Security and Growth for All in the Region." This speech received widespread praise for presenting a proactive approach to India's role in the region of Indian Ocean, and subsequent diplomatic visits and agreements with coastal and island nations seemed to validate this vision. This paper seeks to evaluate the degree to which India has been successful in implementing a strategy that enhances security and prosperity in the maritime region. Despite the initial enthusiasm for SAGAR, there has been criticism regarding India's perceived sluggish progress in fulfilling the commitments made within its maritime and naval diplomacy. The paper underscores specific decisions and actions taken since 2015 that have contributed to the governance of maritime affairs in the region. It argues that there has been a significant shift in how SAGAR now serves as a framework for strategic initiatives, indicating a substantial change in India's approach to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Conclusion

India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is rooted in fostering peace, unity, stability, and economic progress while countering security concerns and potential challenges. This vision involves international

partnerships, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, research, and exploration, along with the cultural diplomacy and soft power initiatives. India aspires to play a conscientious role in the region, contributing to its overall well-being. The successful execution of this vision will significantly impact the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

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