

BEYOND GEOGRAPHY: REVISITING COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA IN INDO- PACIFIC

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific is the hub of world politics in the present geopolitical parlance and while the South-East Asia provides a theatre for the promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) but it shows divergence in the understanding of the Indo-Pacific among the differing actors engaged. Indo-Pacific is used as a connective tissue of economic and cultural interactions between India and South-east Asia, over and above the idea of Indo-Pacific that is merely cartographic delineation of the region. So the central research questions handled in the paper tend to transgress the geographical certainty by presenting Indo-pacific as a concept where the ideas of expansion of sites of collective cooperation between India and South-East Asia promoting partnerships take shape. This paper aims to study the China aggressiveness in its neighborhood and also critically analyse how, and why Indo-pacific has become a field of contention and rivalry between China and The US which eventually determines the strategic choices and interests of South-East Asia and India. This paper seeks to trace the path of RCEP so as to identify the gap in the commitment of India and ASEAN towards the dream of the Indo-Pacific. This paper is based on the literature review of the changing dynamics and role of the actors in the Indo-Pacific region. Highlights: The report forces weariness of the contentions for control, the transfer from

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stereotyping struggle to aggregate expenses focused on the "ASEAN focal point" moved toward pondering the vital interests in which strife and participation are metabolic processes keeping pace with geographic changes in the world economy.

Keywords: economic cooperation, dominance, global politics, Indo-Pacific vision.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is the single most important geostrategic challenge in the modern-day geopolitical and geo-economic discussions. More than 65 per cent of the world GDP is produced in the Indo-Pacific region, and half of the total world trade goes through the waters of the two oceans of the Indo-Pacific (Vashisht, 2023). This merger of the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific Ocean region represents the economic, political and cultural interests of actors in both regions, to strengthen a concept tried by then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 to support the idea of “developing political and economic joints among democracies located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans to protect sea lanes and economic prosperity” (Vashisht, 2023). The evolution of the Indo-Pacific geography casts the maritime trade route from Europe and the Persian Gulf orientated to the Pacific Ocean through the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia from a context of conflict to cooperation, placing India and Southeast Asia in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) at centre stage in terms of peace and security, geopolitical ambitions, China containment, trade and investment collaboration, sustainable development and regulation of disaster risk management, respectively. INDO-PACIFIC: BEYOND THE MAP The Indo-Pacific is more than a cartographic delineation, as it is an idea which establishes and organises the global order of structures, balances of power, institutions and connectivity.

Objective of the Paper

This research paper broadly divides into five sections to address the study's purposes. 'Indo-Pacific' is a popular buzzword nowadays for nations and people from all walks of life, but the first part of the section tries to decipher the ability to conceptually understand 'Indo-Pacific' and the extent of engagement in the made-up structure. The second section focusses on the geopolitical landscape of Indo-Pacific cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. The third section presents the aggressiveness of China and the role of the USA in how it can influence the policies of Southeast Asian countries, the region being impacted by Chinese expansionism. The fourth part describes the relationship between India and ASEAN guided by the Indo-Pacific vision and critiques the absence of diligence in promoting collaboration. The last part discusses the main implications of the paper and concludes by outlining directions for future research.

Concept of Indo-Pacific

While the term “Indo-Pacific” is based on geographic understanding, it is viewed as an entity that is “accelerating economic and security connections between the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, creating the single strategic system” (Medcalf, 2013). The Indo-Pacific concept has persisted to such a level that the policymaking strategies are not only governed but also the power equations and future commands in the region. As Heydarian puts it, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as a cauldron of geopolitical competition as well as economic dynamism. The New Silk Road is a battleground for the future of the world (Heydarian, 2020, pp. 2-3). The move from Asia Pacific to Indo-Pacific brings heavy maritime freight to the geographical space, acknowledging that the sea is the primary highway of trade and rivalry [5]. Indo-Pacific: New Edition first and foremost, but some also add other areas, such as, for instance, the Middle East and East Africa (Beeson & Wilson, 2018, p.).

As noted by Doyle & Rumley, the Indo-Pacific is a ‘mapmaking phenomenon intimately contested’ (Doyle & Rumley, 2019, p. 5) because the map lays out the power structures in the region and sections out small states squeezed between great powers. The nationalistic shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific reshapes the focus of economic conflict in radically new geographical outlines. First, the redistribution of power around the globe so that China and India are now both Great Powers competing for strategic advantage affecting the situations in the two regions (Bisley & Philips, 2013, p. 99) is even more significant; it is about India in the western Pacific (Mohan, 2012, p. 212). Second, the new geographical constructions are the growing strategic importance of the sea traces of communication in the Indian Ocean plus the deep connections in between them (Bisley & Philips, 2013, p. 99, in addition to Heydarian, 2020, p. 7). The second important cause is increasing economic ties between Asian nations (Bisley & Philips, 2013, p. 100). While the Indo-Pacific concept has gained traction, these limits to the idea of an Indo-Pacific as a unitary space highlight the ongoing importance of sub-regions. It is, as Medcalf notes, a super-region, where the sub-regions still count, and many of those sub-regions have their own ‘nasty strategic microclimates’ (Medcalf, 2013, 23). It is significant that both Indo-Pacific and non-Indo-Pacific ways idiosyncratically interpret the complexities conversely, and such a plethora of issues give birth to challenges preventing the aspect of cooperation in the region.

Cooperation between India and South-East Asia

Currently, India and Southeast Asia have colonial political borders, but their natural borders reflect geographical realities. The unification of ideas, culture, commerce and social customs between India and Southeast Asia is laid out in history. The term was first used in 2007, but the vision emerged as the INDOPACIFIC INITIATIVE FOR INDIA (IPOI), which has certain aspects highlighting its characteristics of cooperation. (a) and representation – declining the region as a free, open and inclusive region based on an open and inclusive regional transcending the national boundaries, (b) All nations with a stake in the region are welcome. (b) it preserves the place of ASEAN

centrality and institutions at the heart of the regional security architecture Plan B, hi News Task Force. 10 Members of the Task Force (c) a region with a common rule-based order founded upon the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation and norms based on the will of all; (d) to maintain the international law in the sea and the rightful freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of the dispute, prevention of maritime crimes, protection of marine ecology, and prioritisation of the blue economy. (e) a rules-based, balanced, and stable trade regime in the Indo-Pacific Region. (f) to promote connectivity and sustainable development, which should be trade and not strategic competition or a debt trap. To prevent great power rivalry or war in the region (g) (Modi, 2018).

However, South-East Asian countries are at the centre of the Indo-Pacific; therefore, a strategic outlook on the region is required. Proposing a differing perception of the region serving various national interests, the Indo-Pacific prism is created for the regional dimension to harness the opportunity and confront the challenges with the greater impetus of the ASEAN-led mechanism. The following are key aspects: (a) a vision of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, but not as a geographical entity but as a highly concentrated and interlinked space; (b) treating the region as a zone of cooperation rather than rivalry. (c) Development and prosperity for all and (d) the role and significance of the maritime domain and perspective in the changing regional architecture. (Vivek Puri, 2023)

In that sense, the dialogue needs more critical analysis of the nature of the relationship between India and Southeast Asia through ASEAN. The challenges in the cooperation domain are the regional comprehensive economic partnership (RCEP), which has been a contention point between India and ASEAN. Working on both the economic matters means representing the role of ensuring stability and security in the region. A few discussions point to the fact that the economic containment may widen between India and the Indo-Pacific but also between India and the ASEAN states as well. Being outside the trade bloc, however, might appear to be the better option for the UK (Panda, 2019). However, the infrastructural

development is not getting fully utilised, although there are enough connecting exercises. The September 2021 ASEAN conference pointed out that "connectivity offers the transmission channels through which impulses of development can disseminate throughout the region and can contribute to the dynamic of economic and social progress" (PIB, 2021). The inability to address insurgency security issues along with the backwardness of the chosen border areas to host the developmental projects has further delayed the initiative (A Study on Act East Policy, 2022).

China-USA rivalry and impacts on Indo-Pacific

Each of South-East Asia's theatres is filled with individual actors, with individual means to respond to pressure. The Indo-Pacific region seemingly has turned into a stage of great powers' ideologies, and Southeast Asian countries have had to bow down whilst making their policies. The overall character of existing Sino-US great power competition has rendered the alignment politics of the region even more consequential (Huong Le Thu, 2020). Competing Interests; Divergent Policy Framing – malaise, sick Latin! The Free and Open Indo-Pacific as perceived from Southeast Asia is similarly not an abstraction free of the last observable bust; a high-definition glare at the piece, both hard power in size to modify and old power in the part piece, and it elevates and trusts Southeast Asia (Huong le Thu, 2020). The creeping aggressiveness and revisionist ambitions of China are a matter of concern for India and Southeast Asian countries. This is not a reflection of the region as a whole but rather the shift in the USA's strategic footprint, not China's strategic footprint. As an example, among the more standard assaults on Obama's legacy is how he did not do something to combat China's aggression. The Philippines are certainly being burnt over their openness, having been told "the US will not go to war over some rocks" – indeed. And this shivered the confidence of South-East Asia's left over the reliability of the US and plunged them into the arms of the Beijing coercion (statement of S. Satyanath). The state of affairs causes South-East Asian countries to oscillate between twin poles, which in the potential enjoys being settled through collaboration between India and South-East Asia as an example of

inclusiveness. Furthermore, the jurisdiction of the free and open Indo-Pacific that forms the principles of Indo-Pacific uncertainties and challenges is increasingly in opposition to Washington and Beijing. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific will not be a collection of free nations free to decide amongst themselves, but rather an echo of coercion compelling either side. When Singapore hosted the ASEAN Summit in 2018, for instance, PM Lee Hsien Loong said that,

We can all see that the geopolitical uncertainties are on the rise. On the other hand, all the ASEAN member states are being drawn by the different powers with the different pressures. More must be done under these conditions to keep us bound and moving. It is, however, also a double-edged sword: without it, ASEAN will have no relevance — and no values for ASEAN members and outside partners as well. (Huong Le Thu, 2020)

Yet to track this transition from conflict zone to cooperation zone utterly requires mapping the economic spider web, the sea lifeline, and the cultural network. It is more than the power politics that need some insight into a fundamental shift in India's "look East" policy, of which the "Act East" policy nurturing economic bonds, people-to-people contacts, and military drills presents a template and an alternative interaction model based on respect, common experience, and regional stability (Saurabh Singh, 2024). For example, on security challenges, New Delhi and Hanoi reached an arms deal as well as supported Hanoi in the South Sea sovereignty disputes with Beijing [13]. Indian bonds through IOR as a meaningful stabiliser vis-à-vis China build into a rule-based international order and its economic partnerships with Southeast Asian nations.

Indo-Pacific Vision and ASEAN centrality

ASEAN is positioned at the centre of Indo-Pacific geopolitics; the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific from mid-2019 provides terminology to recognise the current tensions and changes that aim to prevent deeper mistrust, miscalculations, and zero-sum game behaviour (Pankaj, 2023, Indo-

Pacific Strategies). It foresees ASEAN centrality as the underpinning tenet in fostering cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region (ASEAN outlook, 2019). This region serves as the maritime centre because ASEAN not only fosters cooperation in this area, but also facilitates the investigation of unresolved historical maritime conflicts, ensuring that all parties involved can share their perspectives and work together to achieve a peaceful resolution. The ASEAN's Indo-Pacific vision also goes beyond and discusses the SMART MR policy, which is concerned with the preservation and protection of the marine environment and biodiversity, promoting green shipping, developing the blue economy, sustaining management of marine resources and encouraging technical cooperation in marine science (Pankaj, Indo-Pacific Strategies, 2023). Second, the connectivity – physical, institutional and people-to-people – of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, US connectivity initiatives stressing financial viability, economic sustainability, and public-private participation are avoided by the ASEAN outlook, as are regional connectivity initiatives regardless of such aspects (ASEAN outlook, 2019).

Conclusion

This means that the actors and forces operating in the region must be granted the right to open spaces on the seas and in the air, which includes freedom of movement, freedom of commerce, and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the International Law (Mohd Akhter Ali, 2019). It is the trust of the region that Indian engagement should be in accordance with South-East Asian ambitions, and Chinese assertiveness, on the other hand, should be strategic in nature. The supply chain, with the free trade and labour mobility on both ends, should be an area of focus in highlighting the key takeaways in the absence of the notion of commitment between India and Southeast Asia. Also, a renegotiation will be needed to resolve the trades and economies to get the private sectors motivated enough to invest in Southeast Asian states. More recently, the cyber domain has emerged as yet another theatre of tactical engagement between both, amidst incessant pressure from China. So, goal-orientated towards sustainable development goals, both

ASEAN and India shall think of the free, open and inclusive region, keeping away from the understanding of other actors' millions.

However, India-South-East Asia cooperation has emerged as a bridge in defining the geopolitical narrative of the region. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Lestari Priansari Marsudi notes that strategic trust is essential for creating bridges in the Indo-Pacific and ensuring the region remains peaceful and stable. But the idea of the Indo-Pacific is a key to transcending the cartography of the region. Certain definitions of 'region' create significant barriers to the cooperation zone, while epistemic intervention can serve as a tool to foster respect for that zone.

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