

"The Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs gives strategic coherence to India's Look East policy."

Though the term Indo-Pacific has been gaining traction in Indian policy circles for some time now, it achieved operational clarity after the Indian vision was presented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018. His speech underscored that for India the geography of the Indo-Pacific stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to Oceania (from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas) which also includes in its fold the Pacific Island countries.

Many mechanisms

India's Act East policy remains the bedrock of the national Indo-Pacific vision and the centrality of ASEAN is embedded in the Indian narrative. India has been an active participant in mechanisms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), in ASEAN-led frameworks like the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and the Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor. India has also been convening the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, in which the navies of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) participate. India has boosted its engagements with Australia and New Zealand and has deepened its cooperation with the Republic of Korea. Through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, India is stepping up its interactions with the Pacific Island countries. India's growing partnership with Africa can be seen through the convening of mechanisms like the India-Africa Forum Summits. India's multi-layered engagement with China as well as strategic partnership with Russia underlines its commitment to ensuring a stable, open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

India views the Indo-Pacific as a geographic and strategic expanse, with the 10 ASEAN countries connecting the two great oceans. Inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific. Security in the region must be maintained through dialogue, a common rules-based order, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. More connectivity initiatives impinging on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability should be promoted.

A natural corollary

The setting up of the Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in April 2019 is a natural corollary to this vision. Given how the term Indo-Pacific has been gaining currency and how major regional actors such as the U.S., Japan and Australia are articulating their regional visions — including this term in their official

policy statements — it was becoming imperative for India to operationalise its Indo-Pacific policy. The renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command as well as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in December 2018 showcase Washington's more serious engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept was unveiled by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, and Australia released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017, which details Australia's Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity.

Given the huge geography that the Indian definition of Indo-Pacific covers, there was a need for a bureaucratic re-alignment to create a division that can imbibe in its fold the various territorial divisions in the MEA that look after the policies of the countries which are part of the Indo-Pacific discourse. This wing provides a strategic coherence to the Prime Minister's Indo-Pacific vision, integrating the IORA, the ASEAN region and the Quad to the Indo-Pacific dynamic.

The integration of the IORA means that attention will continue to be focused on the IOR. This can be a result of the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean and Chinese diplomacy in the region. The Ministry of Defence and the Indian Navy also are also taking note of the developments in this region and this wing can work in coordination with these two organs as well. Given New Delhi's stakes in its immediate neighbourhood, a more focused and integrated approach is needed.

Additionally, ASEAN forms the cornerstone of India's Act East policy and Indo-Pacific vision. As ASEAN now enters into deliberations to carve out its own Indo-Pacific policy, it underscores a shift in the stand of the sub-regional organisation towards the Indo-Pacific concept. Initially there was a lurking fear within the grouping that the Indo-Pacific concept might just overshadow ASEAN's centrality and importance. Visualising the ASEAN region as a part of the wider Indo-Pacific shows an evolution in the region's thinking, opening new possibilities for India's engagement with the grouping.

Challenges ahead

India's bureaucratic shift is an important move to articulate its regional policy more cogently, coherently and with a renewed sense of purpose. There are still challenges for India, especially how it will integrate the Quadrilateral initiative which got revived in 2017 with its larger Indo-Pacific approach. It will also be important for the new MEA division to move beyond security and political issues and articulate a more comprehensive policy towards the region. Commerce and connectivity in particular will have to be prioritised if India is to take advantage of a new opening for its regional engagement.

While India has been consistently emphasising "inclusiveness" in the Indo-Pacific framework, it will be challenging to maintain a balance between the interests of all stakeholders. There are differences between India's vision and the U.S.'s strategy for the Indo-Pacific even as countries like China and Russia view the Indo-Pacific with suspicion. As geopolitical tensions rise between China and the U.S., the MEA's new division will have its task cut out if India's long-term political and economic interests in the region are to be preserved. A bureaucratic change was indeed needed, but going forward the challenge would be to see how effectively this change manifests itself in managing India's growing diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

Act East Policy

What is it?

- India's Act East Policy was brought to promote participation among the countries of Asia-Pacific region.
- This policy took the Look East Policy by former governments one step forward.
- When this policy was started, it was seen as an economic initiative, but now this policy has acquired a political, strategic and cultural significance, under which a mechanism for increasing dialogue and mutual cooperation between countries has also been started.
- Under this policy, India has extended contact with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, Singapore and ASEAN countries as well as countries in the Asian-Pacific region.

The objective

- Act East Policy has emphasized on initiatives like Make in India along with infrastructure, manufacturing, trade, skill development, urban development and smart cities, which exist between India and ASEAN countries.
- Simultaneously, it is also aiming to encourage connectivity projects, space and citizens connectivity between countries, so that the sector can grow and people remain prosperous. The purpose of the Act East Policy is to promote economic cooperation, to promote cultural ties and to further strengthen strategic partnership.
- According to the Ministry of External Affairs website, North East is a priority in this policy. The ASEAN heads of state were invited as the chief guest on the occasion of Republic Day this year.

Look east policy

- When in 1991 the government of Narasimha Rao was formed in centre, the Look East Policy was started. This policy was seen as a new direction and new opportunities in the context of India's foreign policy.
- After Narsingh Rao, the Vajpai government and then the UPA government also extended it. The purpose of this policy is to reduce the importance of China in Southeast Asia.
- Former US President Barack Obama also praised

India's 'Look East' policy. In his administration, External Affairs Minister Hillary Clinton had said that her country wanted to support India's policy.

- Although experts believe that the US had said this to increase its dominance in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions.

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

- The objective of the establishment of IORA is to strengthen regional cooperation and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean region, IORA consists of 21 member countries and 7 negotiations partners.
- In the second IORA Renewable Energy Ministerial Meeting, ministries of 9 members and representatives of 21 member countries participated.
- IORA is an international organization; it includes the country of Indian Ocean. This is a regional forum, in which a single platform is provided to government, business and academics.

BIMSTEC

- BIMSTEC is a group of seven countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, which are located near the Bay of Bengal.
- It was founded on June 6, 1997 by the Bangkok Declaration.
- BIMSTEC is headquartered in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh.
- BIMSTEC member countries are India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.
- The population of these countries is approximately 1.5 billion, which is 22% of the world's total population.

The objective

- To promote technical and economic cooperation among member countries.
- The major cooperation areas among the BIMSTEC countries are trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fishing industry.
- In the year 2008, 8 more sectors were added; these sectors are agriculture, public health, poverty eradication, terrorism, environment, culture, climate change and people contacts.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-

1. Look East Policy was started in 1991 by the V.P. Singh government.
2. BIMSTEC is a group of seven countries in South Asia and South-East Asia.
3. The objective of IORA establishment is to strengthen the regional cooperation and sustainable development.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. Indo-Pacific region is emerging as economical and political centre of global importance. Explain the efforts made by India to present itself in this region till now . (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 17 May. is 1 (a)

