

Reclaiming the Indo-Pacific narrative

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"The ASEAN's intent to be in the driving seat is clear as it seeks to manage the emerging regional order with policy moves."

At the 34th summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bangkok in June, its member states finally managed to articulate a collective vision for the Indo-Pacific region in a document titled "The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". At a time when the geopolitical contestation between China and the United States is escalating, it has become imperative for the ASEAN to reclaim the strategic narrative in its favour in order to underscore its centrality in the emerging regional order.

Though there were divisions among ASEAN member states in the run-up to the summit, they managed to come up with a non-binding document. It underlines in the document the need for an inclusive and "rules-based framework" to "help to generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region". An awareness of the emergence of a great power contest around its vicinity pervades the document as it argues that "the rise of material powers, i.e. economic and military, requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game".

Despite individual differences and bilateral engagements ASEAN member states have with the U.S. and China, the regional grouping can now claim to have a common approach as far as the Indo-Pacific region is concerned and which the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayuth Chan-ocha, suggested "should also complement existing frameworks of cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels and generate tangible and concrete deliverables for the benefit of the region's peoples".

Conduct in the China Sea

What has been interesting also is the ASEAN member states agreeing to push for a quick conclusion of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, an increasingly contested maritime space which is claimed largely by China and in parts by the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. Tensions continue to rise over the militarisation of this waterway; in June, a Philippine fishing boat sank after it was rammed by a Chinese vessel. It is hoped that the first draft of the code for negotiations will see the light by this year end. With these moves, the ASEAN is clearly signalling its intent to be in the driving seat as it seeks to manage the geopolitical churn around it.

Engaged with the Indo-Pacific concept for some time now, it has now been pushed into articulating its formal response with a sense of urgency after other major regional players began laying their cards on the table. The release of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy report in June — it focusses on preserving a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in the face of a more "assertive China" — was perhaps the final push that was needed to bring the ASEAN discussion on the subject to a close. Japan had already unveiled its Free and Open Indo-Pacific

concept in 2016, while Australia released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017, detailing its Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific vision at the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2018, with India even setting up an Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) earlier this year.

For a long time, the ASEAN has been reluctant to frontally engage with the Indo-Pacific discourse as the perception was that it may antagonise China. But there was soon a realisation that such an approach might allow others to shape the regional architecture and marginalise the ASEAN itself. And so the final outlook that the ASEAN has come up with effectively seeks to take its own position rather than following any one power's lead.

The framework

While the ASEAN outlook does not see the Indo-Pacific as one continuous territorial space, it emphasises development and connectivity, underlining the need for maritime cooperation, infrastructure connectivity and broader economic cooperation. The ASEAN is signalling that it would seek to avoid making the region a platform for major power competition. Instead its frame of reference is economic cooperation and dialogue. The fact that the ASEAN has gone ahead and articulated an Indo-Pacific outlook is in itself a seeming challenge to China which refuses to validate the concept. But the ASEAN's approach is aimed at placating China by not allowing itself to align with the U.S.'s vision for the region completely.

India has welcomed the ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific as it sees "important elements of convergence" with its own approach towards the region. During U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to India in June, India was categorical that it is "for something" in the Indo-Pacific and "not against somebody", seeking to carefully calibrate its relations with the U.S. and China in this geopolitically critical region. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has suggested "[and] that something is peace, security, stability, prosperity and rules". India continues to invest in the Indo-Pacific; on the sidelines of the recent G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, Mr. Modi held discussions on the Indo-Pacific region with U.S. President Donald Trump and Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a focus on improving regional connectivity and infrastructure development.

With the ASEAN finally coming to terms with its own role in the Indo-Pacific, the ball is now in the court of other regional stakeholders to work with the regional grouping to shape a balance of power in the region which favours inclusivity, stability and economic prosperity.



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ASEAN

What is it?

- ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) is a regional organization of 10 Southeast Asian Nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Brunei and Laos).
- It was formed on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok by five countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.
- However, after joining countries like Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, the number of member countries increased to 10. Significantly, the official language of ASEAN countries is English.
- Its headquarters is in Indonesia's capital Jakarta.
- In 1994, ASEAN established the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), which was intended to promote security.
- There are 23 members of the ARF, including America, Russia, India, China, Japan and North Korea.

Background

- Brunei was incorporated in 1984 and Vietnam in 1995. Further, in 1997 Laos and Myanmar were made part of it.
- In 1999, Cambodia was made its member. ASEAN's first meeting took place in 1976, whose agenda was 'Peace and Cooperation'.
- In 1992, India became ASEAN's regional dialogue partner and became a full member in 1996. China also tries to become a full member of ASEAN.
- In its meeting held in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur in 2015, a big decision was taken on economic policy. In which all the member countries decided to make an economic community. It was also made in December 31, 2015. In which the members are bound by many economic agreements.

An objective

- Economic growth in member states, promote social advancement and cultural development.
- To ensure peace and stability in the South East Asia region, ASEAN member countries should discuss ways and ways to address their differences peacefully.

- To promote mutual cooperation in socio-economic and cultural areas in member states.
- Providing assistance for training and facilities in academic business technical and administrative matters in ASEAN countries.
- Promoting necessary research and study for development and cooperation in Southeast Asia.
- Develop close and beneficial relationships with other regional and international organizations of the same purpose world and explore possibilities for cooperation with them.

34th ASEAN Summit

- This time, the 34th ASEAN Summit was held in Thailand's capital Bangkok (bankok).
- This time the leaders of South East Asian countries discussed regional issues including the migration of Rohingya Muslims and the South China Sea dispute.
- There is a longstanding dispute between the ASEAN countries on the South China Sea. The South China Sea is one of the world's busiest waterways.

India and ASEAN

- The second phase of ASEAN and India's cooperation began when in 2001, both of them decided to organize a regular annual summit for speeding up mutual cooperation at a higher level.
- As a result, since 2002, the first India ASEAN Summit was held in Cambodia's city name PENH, since then, the ASEAN Summit of India is being done regularly every year.
- India ASEAN Summit was organized in 2017 in Manila, capital of Philippines.
- It is important that Modi has invited all ASEAN countries on January 26, 2018 at the Republic Day celebrations of India, even earlier India had organized the India ASEAN Summit in December 2012 on the occasion of the anniversary of relations.



Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. In the context of ASEAN, consider the following statements-

1. It was established by 5 countries together on 8 August, 1967 in Bangkok.
2. ASEAN established Asian Regional forum in 1994.
3. 34th ASEAN summit has been established in Bangkok.

Which of the above statement is /are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3
(c) 1 and 3 (d) All of the above

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. Explain the role of ASEAN in Indo-Pacific region in view to rising tension between America and China. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 4 July. is 1(b).

