

# CHARTING A CLEAR COURSE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

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.

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.

## The ASEAN embrace

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.

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.

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.

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