

1. Navigating the Indo-Pacific

Context:

- “Indo-Pacific” is today a buzzword that has been interpreted differently by various countries in their outlook or vision documents. **The “Asian Century” appears inevitable**, but the question remains if it will be unipolar, bipolar or multipolar? Will it be a century of peace and development, or will it involve long-drawn contestations?

Background:

- Back in 1971, when Sri Lanka proposed the notion of an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZOP), it was more about the presence of Western powers and establishment of foreign bases. Ironically, China then stood with countries like India in opposing bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- Its position was that it did not have, nor did it seek bases anywhere. That is a far cry from its strategy now of actively foraying into the Indian Ocean and seeking bases in Gwadar and Djibouti and special arrangements elsewhere.
- India’s position has also evolved. If India earlier opposed the presence of foreign powers in the Indian Ocean, it now carries out joint exercises with a number of them to promote interoperability. It welcomes the presence of the US, Japan and other partner countries in the Indian Ocean as a counter to the growing Chinese presence.

Importance of Indo-pacific:

- Asia is witnessing the simultaneous rise of several powers. Global engines of economic growth have shifted to Asia, first to the Asia-Pacific, and now, more widely, to the Indo-Pacific that includes South Asia.
- **The continent, home to 60 per cent of the Global Population**, has emerged as the new fulcrum for geo-economic and geostrategic realignment.
- The term Indo-Pacific is certainly more inclusive and better accommodates the growing aspirations of a wider constituency.

Limitations of Indo-Pacific:

- The economic success in the Indo-Pacific region has not been matched by stable security architecture. The region has some of the highest military expenditures.
- Trade, territorial disputes and geo-strategic contestations are rampant. This places limitations on the region’s ability to engage in a process of give and take as seen in the RCEP negotiations.

Challenges before Indo-Pacific:

- There are fundamental disruptions to the existing equilibrium in the three sub-segments of the Indo-Pacific.
- The emergence of the US as a major energy exporter to Asia has eroded the importance of the Gulf oil producers in the Western Indian Ocean.
- In the South China Sea, the dependence of ASEAN on China for its prosperity and security assurances is growing.
- In the Pacific, there is a new contestation, which pits US programmes such as the BUILD Act, ARIA and Asia EDGE against the inducements offered by China to small island nations. Japan and Australia have also joined hands with the US in the Blue Dot network to promote infrastructure and connectivity.
- The world today is undergoing a fundamental transformation. There are several facets to the emerging uncertainty. Traditional and non-traditional security threats have grown in magnitude. The spectre of terrorism, especially cross-border terrorism, continues to challenge peace and prosperity.
- Geopolitical considerations are increasingly driving trade and investment decisions; on the other hand, the geo-economic forces unleashed by China's economic rise are redefining the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Emerging China:

- The situation in the South China Sea is more complex. Various claimants are pitted against one another, with China's irredentist **nine-dash line engulfing the Exclusive Economic Zone of several others.**
- China now justifies its increasing forays in the IOR, including with nuclear submarines, by claiming that it has "always" had a historical right to the Indian Ocean.
- **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** is supposed to endure for half a century. Yet, the absence of a key neighbouring country like India, for very valid reasons, eroded its credibility. Now, many others are questioning the BRI.
- There are many contradictions in the context of the emerging construct of the Indo-Pacific. For example, the US, like India, Japan, Australia and many others, advocates freedom of navigation and over-flight, and respect for the rule of law and international norms.
- It adheres to many tenets of UNCLOS without having ratified the treaty. China's adherence to UNCLOS is more honoured in breach than in observance.

Conclusion:

- India will have to manage its relations with China, no matter the challenges. Ties with Japan would remain a key component of India's vision for a stable Indo-Pacific and a cornerstone of its Act East policy.
- However, India at this juncture does not have to make a binary choice in the Indo-Pacific between a development-centric agenda with ASEAN centrality and a security-centric outlook revolving around the Quad. Both are likely to remain parallel tracks with some overlap for the foreseeable future.

