



Dealing with Indo-Pacific Countries

*This editorial is based on [“Dealing with the Indo-Pacific is not Easy”](#) which was published in *The Hindu* on 09/06/2022. It talks about the significance major geopolitical challenges of the Indo-Pacific region.*

For Prelims: Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Quad, Blue Dot Network, South China Sea, Senkaku Islands Dispute and other territorial disputes

For Mains: Indo-Pacific and its Significance, Major Irritants in the Indo-Pacific Region

In recent times there has been a shifting of goal posts by major world powers from other areas of conflict to the Indian and Pacific Ocean. This has largely been due to Chinese belligerence in the **South China Sea** by hegemonizing its intention over the entire seawater defying the laid down UN conventions and **international maritime laws**.

The present geo-political situation in the Indo-Pacific is fraught with major irritants destabilising the region. There is a need to establish common standards to form the basis of deeper integration in the future and to ensure equal access to [global commons](#) for all the countries as a right under international law

What are the Recent Geo-Political Developments in the Indo-Pacific Region?

- **US' Indo-Pacific Strategy:** Recently, the [US administration has announced its long-awaited Indo-Pacific strategy](#) which focusses on building collective capacity to deal with challenges in the region.
 - These include a focus on **challenges from China**, advancing the US relationship, a **'Major Defence Partnership' with India** and supporting its role as a **net security provider in the region**.
- **EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy:** The [European Union \(EU\)](#) has recently come up with an [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) that aims to enhance its engagement across a wide spectrum.
 - The EU already sees itself and the Indo-Pacific as **“natural partner regions”**.
 - It is a significant player in the **Indian Ocean littoral states**, the [ASEAN](#) area and the Pacific Island states.
- **AUKUS Grouping:** In September 2021, the US has announced a new trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific, between Australia, the UK and the US ([AUKUS](#)).
 - The security grouping AUKUS will focus on **advancing strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region**.
 - The major highlight of this arrangement is the sharing of US nuclear submarine technology to Australia.

- **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework:** Nearly every one of the nations in this part of the world recognises the assertiveness and aggressiveness of China.
 - To deal with China, the US at the recently held [Quad Summit](#) in Tokyo launched the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework \(IPEF\)](#) to offer the region better alternatives to fulfil its developmental goals.
 - The IPEF will work on **fine-tuning four major pillars:** standards and rules for **digital trade**; resilient **supply chains**; **green energy** commitments; and **fair trade**.

Why is the Indo-Pacific Significant?

- The Indo-Pacific region has **more than half of the world's population** with **2 billion people living under democratic rule**.
- This region generates **a third of the world's economic output**, more than any other region of the World.
- Three of the most important allies of the United States namely Japan, South Korea and Australia are located here.
- **More than one-third of the foreign trade** of the world takes place in this region.
- The **world's largest economies are located** in the Indo-Pacific region namely, China, **India**, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, Taiwan, Malaysia and Philippines.

What are the Major Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region?

- **Aggressive Policies of Certain Countries:** The Indo-Pacific region has been under pressure and East Asia, in particular. **South Korea and Japan face regular nuclear and missile threats** from North Korea.
 - **China, too, not only challenges international maritime laws** in the [South China Sea](#), but also confronts Japan over the [Senkaku Islands dispute](#).
 - Six nations, including **China and Taiwan**, are involved in **the dispute** over the [Spratly Islands](#), which are supposedly sitting on vast reserves of oil and natural gas.
 - China has vigorously **militarised some portions of the disputed isles**, islets and coral reefs; and countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are anxious not to be left behind.
- **Unwillingness to Act Against China:** There is a limit to which countries in the region will want to get on the anti-China bandwagon, economic or strategic.
 - Whether it is in East, Southeast or South Asia, **every country has its own unique relationship with China**.
 - Though South Korea and Japan are part of a strong American security/strategic partnership, they will be **keen on maintaining their economic status with China**.
 - This is also true for the **ASEAN Nations**.
 - India may be a part of the Quad, but is quite mindful that it is the only country in the group that shares a [land border with China which is laced with disputes](#).
- **Issues with IPEF:** The first indications are that while the IPEF may be a good idea, there is discontent that the framework does not address issues of trade and tariffs.
 - Also considering that the U.S.'s previous initiatives (the [Blue Dot Network](#) and the [Build Back Better World \(B3W\) Initiative](#)) have made little headway in changing the region's infrastructural needs, the IPEF faces a credibility challenge.

What Needs to be Pacify the Indo-Pacific?

- **Pondering Over Strong Actions:** In response to geopolitical tensions, countries have increasingly emphasised resilience and national security considerations over the economic gains from free trade and investment flows but they should be very careful about taking extreme measures, preemptively before conflicts arise.
 - Whether to **disconnect themselves from global supply chains** and strive for reshoring or to go for **"friend-shoring"** and to **cut off countries that are not allies or friends**.
 - **Such actions shut off avenues for regional growth and cooperation, deepen divisions** between countries, and may precipitate the very conflicts that should be avoided.
 - Over the next decade, a range of major events could occur that would have a significant

impact in this region such as large-scale interstate conflicts over disputed territories.

- **Appropriate policies and actions** need to be taken by **India to promote and defend its own interests** in the Indian Ocean.

- **Establishing Common Standards:** The immediate focus for the stakeholders should be on establishing the common standards, which could **form the basis of deeper integration in the future.**
 - Such standards will cover **labour rights, environmental standards, protection of intellectual property rights** and rules covering the digital economy.
- **Initiatives for Peace Mongering:** The countries in the region should have equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.
 - It is important to establish connectivity in the region based on **respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity**, consultation, **good governance**, transparency, viability and sustainability.
- **A Combined Indo-Pacific Strategy:** The Indo-pacific strategies of the countries have to devolve themselves on **strengthening relations with all the stakeholder countries.**
 - The areas which need addressal are **improvement in defence cooperation** so as to **strengthen each other's military capabilities**, reduce external military threat, promote economic assistance and look at threatening environmental issues such as ozone depletion and greenhouse emissions.
 - Seven key players identified which would need to get together to enhance cooperation and counter the Chinese challenge would be the **US, India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia and Taiwan.**

Drishti Mains Question

“India’s partnerships today are built on converging strategic interests and a new security environment. As such, the Indo-Pacific is now a theatre of opportunity to increase India’s profile and role globally.”
Comment.