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The Big Picture - Indo-Pacific : Strategic Importance

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The External Affairs Minister, who is on a two day visit to Russia, has said that Indo Pacific is one of the new concepts and approaches thrown up by the changing world. With various countries and international forums using the term Indo Pacific in their official statements, it is gaining currency in recent times.

India, France and Australia have held **track 1.5 dialogue** to identify security challenges and sustainability issues in the Indo Pacific region. Safeguarding freedom of navigation and keeping Indo Pacific stable was a crucial item on the agenda during Prime minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron' s recently concluded annual summit in Paris.

Note:

- The **track 1.5 dialogue** refers to top-level political decision-makers, yet in **informal**, non-official settings.
- These track 1.5 mediation/dialogue processes often serve to sort out and prepare for track 1 talks.
- The first level (track 1) includes negotiation between the leadership of two countries (e.g. political and/or military).

The Term 'Indo-Pacific'

- It is a recent concept. It was about a decade ago that the world started talking about the Indo-Pacific but its rise has been quite significant.
- One of the reasons behind the popularity of this term is an understanding that the **Indian Ocean and the Pacific are a linked strategic theater**.
- Also, the centre of gravity has shifted to Asia. The reason being maritime routes, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific provide the sea lanes. **Majority of the world's trade passes through these oceans.**
 - There was a time before the cold war when the centre of gravity of the universe was across the Atlantic i.e. trade was actually transiting from the Atlantic but now it has shifted.
- The **earlier term used to be Asia-Pacific**, from which India was excluded.
 - This term was prevalent during the cold war time.
 - The shift to the term 'Indo-Pacific' shows the **salience of India in the new construct**.
- Terrorism and the fear of assertion by a particular country in the region are major threats to the Indo-Pacific region.
- The Indo-Pacific region includes world's four big economies: USA, China, Japan and India.
- The term 'Indo-Pacific' is interpreted differently by different stakeholders.
 - **India** considers the region as an **inclusive, open, integrated and balanced space**. India continuously emphasises on strategic inter-connections, common challenges and opportunities between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.
 - **The U.S. considers it to be a free and open Indo-Pacific**, highlighting the importance of **rules or norms of conduct in the region**, thus trying to contain the role of China in the region.
 - **The ASEAN countries look at Indo-Pacific as a consociational model**, thus bringing in China not only for the sake of giving it some stakeholdership but looking for ways to cooperate with it in the region.

Note:

Consociationalism is a stable democratic system in deeply divided societies that is based on power sharing between elites from different social groups.

India's Perspective of Indo-Pacific

- A lot of India's special partners, the US, Australia, Japan and Indonesia actually look at Indo-Pacific as Asia Pacific plus India. They try to embed India into the strategic dynamic of Asia Pacific.
 - They **want India's presence in the South China Sea**, East China Sea, basically **to counter China**.
- India however, seeks to cooperate for an architecture for peace and security in the region. The common prosperity and security require the countries to evolve, through dialogue, a **common rules-based order** for the region.
- For India, Indo-Pacific stands for a **free, open, inclusive region**. It includes all nations in the geography and also others who have a stake in it. In its geographical dimension, India considers the area from the shores of Africa to the shores of America.
- India supports rule-based, open, balanced and **stable trade environment** in the Indo-Pacific Region, which lifts up all nations on the tide of trade and investment. This is the same as what the country expects from the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**.
- Unlike China, **India seeks a unified ASEAN**, not a divided one. China tries to play off some ASEAN members against others, thereby in a way executing 'divide and rule' conquest strategy.
- India does not comply with **the US version of Indo-Pacific, that seeks to contain Chinese dominance**. India is rather looking for the ways through which it can work together with China.
- India is looking for **democratising the region**.
 - Earlier, the region used to be almost like an American lake. However, there exists a fear that the region will become Chinese lake now. Scarborough Shoal dispute is an example here.
 - India **doesn't want hegemony of any player in the region**. India is working in trilaterals such as India-Australia-France, India-Australia-Indonesia to ensure that China does not dominate in the region.

China: A Threat or a Challenge

- China has been a threat to the Asia Pacific countries and is posing threat to Indian interests in the Indian Ocean as well.
 - China has a hold over Hambantota port (Sri Lanka), which is just a few hundred miles off the shores of India.
 - China is supplying military equipment to India's neighbours such as submarines to Myanmar, frigate to Sri Lanka, equipment to Bangladesh and Thailand, thus, in a way, colonising the region.

- **ASEAN:** Some of the member countries of ASEAN have been under the Chinese influence and thus pose a threat to erode **ASEAN's solidarity** with respect to the concept of Indo-Pacific.
However, China is ASEAN's largest trading partner and can hardly be sidelined by the entire grouping which further threatens India's relations with the grouping.
- **Southeast Asia is at the centre of Indo-Pacific and ASEAN is important for India, especially for the country's Act East Policy.** Also, ASEAN countries know that to balance China in the region, India's presence is necessary.
- Despite several differences, the interests of India-China on some issues such as globalisation, climate change etc. match.
 - Also, India and China are members of several international groupings such as **BRICS**, SCO etc.
 - China therefore is viewed as more of a challenge to India's stand in the Indo-Pacific than a threat to its significance in the region.

Way Forward

- 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.
- **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** is necessary for Indo-Pacific security.
MDA implies effective understanding of any activity associated with the maritime environment that could impact upon the security, safety, economy or environment
- **Multipolarity:** Security & peace and law abiding nature of the countries around the region is crucial. This will also allow multipolarity in the region.
The smaller states in the region expect India to step up to the plate and help them widen their options, both economically as well as militarily. India should try to fulfill their aspirations.
- **Strong naval capabilities, multilateral diplomacy, economic integration** with nations is necessary for India to meet the challenges within the Indo-Pacific region.
- India needs to stick to its vision of the India Ocean i.e. **SAGAR - Security and Growth for All in the Region.**