



Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative: Providing Institutional Framework to the Indo-Pacific Region

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Since its inception, the Indo-Pacific construct debates have revolved around the two most critical issues. With the first issue of geographical scope getting more or less settled, the second and equally important issue of creating enabling institutional frameworks is assuming the centre stage in Indo-Pacific debates. The Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) aims to provide a comprehensive institutional framework to the Indo-Pacific architecture. With countries such as Australia, France, Japan, and Vietnam have already voiced their support and/or joined the IPOI, it seems New Delhi's latest initiative is poised to lend greater credibility to the Indo-Pacific construct while establishing India as a responsible stakeholder and a 'rule-maker' rather than a 'rule-taker' in the region. Budding shoots of IPOI are promising and can bring home tangible gains provided sustained efforts are put in to ensure gains on all seven pillars of the IPOI.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region symbolising the 'confluence of Indian and the Pacific Ocean' has put matters maritime to the limelight. It has ignited stronger politico-military and diplomatic-economic debates around the maritime sphere. This is natural considering that in addition to clubbing Indian and Pacific Oceans dynamism together, it also puts countries from Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Pacific coast of the Americas at a common platform akin to the beads of a seamless garland. Home to around two-thirds of the human population, it also commands 62 per cent of the global GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and watches over more than half of global trade that passes through its waters.

While China's Belt and Road Initiative (especially its 21st Maritime Silk Road and controversies surrounding it), and the spiralling China-US competition have played their

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important parts, the launch of the Indo-Pacific construct and its efforts to make Indian and Pacific Oceans a unified ‘strategic’ (and hopefully economic) region has led to the dawn of the Indo-Pacific era.

Armed with soft, hard, and digital infrastructure connectivity considerations, maritime security has become a driving factor in determining the foreign policy calculus of countries across the Indo-Pacific region. Triggered by great power competition, the swiftly changing geopolitical realities have led cooperation in the maritime domain to assume greater significance. It is no more just about exercising power and control; responsible stakeholders are coming together to realise their common goals vis-à-vis connectivity, infrastructure development, supply chain resilience, sustainable development, and protecting global commons. In that regard, India’s participation and growing role have been acknowledged and appreciated by regional and extra-regional powers alike.

2. India in the Indo-Pacific

As one of the leading proponents of the Indo-Pacific, India has played a proactive role in promoting and shaping a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. It has taken steps to institutionalise and infuse credibility to the Indo-Pacific construct. One of the first steps in that regard was India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech at the *Shangri La* Dialogue in Singapore on June 1, 2018. That was the first time when a top Indian leader illustrated India’s Indo-Pacific vision. He stated, “Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity... lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

With the objective to pay closer foreign policy bureaucracy attention to the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific region, the Indian government, in April 2019, established a separate “Indo-Pacific” Division within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Two reasons were highlighted for this change in the structure (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020):

“...to help consolidate India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific across Government of India, in line with the elements set out by the Prime Minister of India in June 2018, and to provide substantive policy elements and programmes to that vision. Indo-Pacific Division deals with matters relating to the Indo-Pacific, India-ASEAN relations, East Asia Summit, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS).”

3. The Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative

Reassuring ASEAN that it is central to India’s Indo-Pacific conception, the Indian Prime Minister launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI) on November 4, 2019, in Bangkok, Thailand. Arguably, no other regional-multilateral platform could have been more apt than the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit (EAS) to launch the IPOI as it includes all major dialogue partners of ASEAN - not only China and Russia - but the most active proponents of Indo-Pacific – Japan, Australia, and the US also. The IPOI is “envisaged as an open, inclusive, non-treaty-based global initiative, aimed to promote practical cooperation by

drawing on existing regional architectures like the EAS framework, IORA, PIF, etc.” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021b).

The IPOI is aimed at generating greater coordination among the already existent institutional structures. Furthermore, ASEAN’s centrality and its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific are complementary to India’s IPOI (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021a). The idea is to act as a bridge between ASEAN and its dialogue partners in devising a common vision for an inclusive Indo-Pacific that “celebrates the rise of India, re-emergence of Japan, and return of the US to the region (Mishra, 2021b)”.

Spelling out key features of the IPOI, the Indian Prime Minister said that it is an ‘open for all initiative’ premised on seven pillars, namely: Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Maritime Ecology; Maritime Resources; Maritime Security; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.

The IPOI was proposed to widen the basket of items in the Indo-Pacific cooperation, which was initially running the risk of getting a little too much traditional security-centric. The IPOI aimed to make up for the shortfall by way of diversifying the elements of cooperation. Of course, maritime security is the first of the seven pillars but, together, the rest of the pillars take ‘a whole of maritime domain’ approach to make it more secure, stable, safe, and inclusive.

By widening the agenda through the IPOI, India has also demonstrated that the Indo-Pacific is not about countering China rather it is about creating a sustainable and peaceful order. India is open to including all stakeholders that can play a responsible role in making this initiative a reality. Indian Prime Minister Modi’s “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayaas” is applicable on the Indo-Pacific cooperation agenda as well.¹ This is also manifested in India’s Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, which was launched in 2015. The IPOI aims to promote SAGAR through its multi-pronged approach.

India has taken steps at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels to bolster the Indo-Pacific and the IPOI. At the bilateral level, India has bilateral maritime exercises with several countries in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, India has the longest un-interrupted maritime exercise with Singapore named *Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise* (SIMBEX), while Malabar and MILAN have emerged as two of the most important multi-nation joint naval exercises steered by India. India has issued two joint maritime statements with Indonesia in 2016 and 2018. Interestingly, the 2018 statement was titled ‘Shared Vision of the two countries on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.’ On June 4, 2020, during the India-Australia virtual summit, ‘Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between the Republic of India and the Government of Australia’ was issued.

As regards trilateral/minilateral cooperation, a range of initiatives has been taken. Notable among these are; India-Australia-France, Japan-America-India (JAI), India-Australia-Indonesia, India-Japan-Australia, and the QUAD.

These developments are important in the context of IPOI's prospects. India has invited several countries to join the IPOI. After Prime Minister Modi's announcement, India sent out a brief to Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam among others for their views and potential participation in the IPOI.

- Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership (AIPOIP) has been underway since the leaders' 2020 virtual summit. AIPOIP is a practical initiative under the Australia-India Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Australian High Commission, 2021). Australia chose to partner with India on maritime ecology and has already commissioned a study for finding scientific ideas.
- New Zealand has also expressed its support to the IPOI though potential areas of cooperation are still under discussion. Countries of the Pacific Island Region such as Fiji are also approached as a part of India's IPOI outreach.
- Japan is arguably the most active partner of India in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries have already started working together on investing in/cooperating with a third country in the region. In October 2020, after the 13th India-Japan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue between Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi agreed to be the lead partner in the connectivity pillar of the IPOI.
- Vietnam is one of the leading partners of India on the IPOI front and seems keen to enhance cooperation in line with the IPOI agenda as per the 17th India-Vietnam Joint Commission Meeting held on August 25, 2020. In October 2020, Vietnam was termed 'a key pillar of our Act East Policy and an important partner in India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (Economic Times, 2020).' In his speech at the 17th ASEAN-India Summit on November 12, 2020, the Indian Prime Minister invited all 10 ASEAN members to cooperate on various pillars of the IPOI. IPOI also figured during the 4th India – Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation meeting held on November 6, 2020, which was represented by Dr Jaishankar and Teodoro Locsin Junior, respectively.
- France is another leading Indo-Pacific power that has joined India in making the IPOI a reality. France is already a part of the India-Australia-France trilateral dialogue, a ministerial meeting of which was held on May 4, 2021. During the meeting, France decided to join the join IPOI by taking lead on the Marine Resources pillar. Like Japan, France has also pledged to work with India in jointly investing in a third country in the Indian Ocean Region.
- The United Kingdom (UK) and India have also agreed to explore possibilities for cooperation under the IPOI. A decision in this regard was made during the India-UK Virtual Summit held on May 4, 2021. During the meeting, the "Roadmap 2030" for India-UK relations was also launched, which underscores the potential Indo-British ties hold in the Indo-Pacific landscape.

4. The Way Ahead

India's IPOI framework is gaining traction. With Australia agreeing to coordinate maritime ecology segment, France steering the marine resource pillar, and Japan doing the same on the connectivity front, it is clear that "India's IPOI initiative will get the assistance and support of

its major Indo-Pacific partners. Among the ASEAN member countries, both Vietnam and the Philippines have agreed to work closely with India under the framework of IPOI. The other key initiatives such as SAGAR, SCRI (Supply Chain Resilience Initiative), Blue Dot Network, and CDRI (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure) have also opened up new vistas of Indo-Pacific cooperation (Mishra, 2021a).”

An important feature of the IPOI is that it aims to coordinate with already existing institutional mechanisms by way of providing them with an ‘umbrella platform’. While Japan and Australia - two of India’s QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) partners have already taken up key responsibilities, the US is yet to formally endorse the IPOI. It has not officially figured in the QUAD leaders’ summit as well. That, arguably, is the right move. To make its IPOI acceptable to all in the region, India should run the IPOI as a separate initiative that could go beyond the QUAD and capture issues that go beyond traditional security issues.

5. Conclusions

Since its inception, debates regarding the Indo-Pacific construct have revolved around two key issues: First, the geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific, and how its contours should be defined. Slowly but steadily, a consensus seems to have emerged on that issue over the past few years, particularly with a consensus on ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific and the AOIP (ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific) putting up ASEAN’s definition of the Indo-Pacific as a ‘closely integrated and interconnected region’ comprising ‘Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions’ (ASEAN, 2019). The second and equally important issue has been the institutionalisation of the Indo-Pacific regional construct. India’s IPOI is a landmark initiative in that regard. It covers the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region, which in any case is a maritime-centred phenomenon.

The IPOI has a lot of potential in the given geopolitical scenario. Considering the fluid regional strategic situation, it is important for India to keep its eyes focus on the ‘whole of Indo-Pacific region approach’ but without losing touch with its security partners via QUAD and other mechanisms. The IPOI is particularly significant on issues that go beyond the traditional security realm.

End Note:

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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.



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Series Editor: Dr Prabir De, AIC, RIS, New Delhi

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