

Maritime Cooperation in Indo-Pacific Region: An Indian perspective

Sanjay Kumar Mishra

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relation, School of Humanities,
Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida- 201308.

Abstract

The maritime region, because of the importance of maritime transport, has been a major determinant of human development since very initial time. After the development of advanced means of maritime transport and the discovery of new areas, maritime region have played a major role in determining the direction of global politics. Looking from the historical point of view, we find that global events like trade alliances between different countries and the success of colonial rule have been successful only because of the research work done in the maritime region. The Atlantic Ocean was of great importance during the colonial period due to the trade of goods and slaves between African and American countries. Similarly, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea remained the main axis of global diplomacy in the 19th and 20th centuries due to the discovery of energy resources such as petroleum. In the current 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a major center of global activities due to the sheer magnitude of economic activity. China, USA, Japan Australia and European powers are finding their interests in this area. Due to its central geographical location, India's strategic, trade and security interests are closely linked to the Indo-Pacific region. In such a situation, it is very necessary to study the cooperation of this region from the Indian perspective. The present study has been carried out on the basis of the above background. Study is based on the information obtained from secondary sources and analytical method of writing has been used in it. Thus, this study may be of relevance to various researchers and policy makers in their future research endeavour.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific, Maritime Cooperation, Diplomacy, Security, Development and International-Trade.

Introduction

The maritime sector has an important role in the international shipping of goods for being cheaper and easier means of transport than air and road. The need for security of maritime regions has increased due to piracy and terrorist attacks (Papa 2013)¹. Due to these concerns, the agenda of development and compliance of statutory maritime security guidelines is being given importance (Germond 2015)². In recent times, due to its important strategic position, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a major platform for diplomacy and conflict between different powers of the world. This region is surrounded by countries which lacks in the energy resources but have large population and vast market. The ports located in this region are among the busiest in the world due to the vast amount of trading activities carried out. Thus, the region is vulnerable to both energy producer and consumer (especially petroleum products) nations. On the one hand, China is trying to give a global dimension to its policies in this region through the Belt & Road Initiative. So on the other hand, America has also changed its strategies regarding the Indo-Pacific region and it wants to increase its dominance in this region. Along with America, countries like Japan, Australia and France have also shown significant interest in this area to stop the expansionist policy of China. The increasing competition among the world's major powers has brought the Indo-Pacific region to the surface of global politics. On the one hand, China is trying to give a global dimension to its policies in this area through the Belt & Road Initiative. On the other hand, America also wants to increase its dominance in this region by changing its strategies related to the Indo-Pacific region. Along with America, countries like Japan, Australia and France have also shown significant interest in this area to stop the expansionist policy of China. The increasing competition among the world's major powers has brought the Indo-Pacific region to the table of global politics. The term "strategy" was gradually combined with "Indo-Pacific", resulting in the concept of "Indo-Pacific strategy" (Chen and Wei, 2015³; Wang and Wu, 2016⁴).

Thai (2009)⁵ in its study noted that the association between security and management has become important for stakeholders using maritime transport in the present times. The association is also important for the reason that all states follow within their own moral, political and legal responsibilities to safeguard their economic and global interests. Interest to manage transportation of people and goods through oceanic routs has also increased due to the increasing rate of illegal immigration and smuggling (Germond and Germond-Duret 2016)⁶. Thus, International maritime has become an important term (Bueger 2015⁷; Germond 2015⁸). Due to India's close geographical location, all the events happening in this region can have a direct impact on India's economy and security. Persistent political instability in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Myanmar is adding to India's maritime concerns. Therefore, it is necessary for India to join such an international

group with individual efforts so that the security of this region can be ensured. In this context, it is necessary that a detailed analysis of the cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region should be done from the Indian perspective. The subject-matter needed for this research paper has been obtained from secondary sources. For this, various documents published by national and international institutions and subject experts have been thoroughly examined. Based on the above facts, three objectives have been outlined for the present study. These objectives are:

- To analyze the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region in the Indian context.
- To find out the major security challenges of this region.
- To identify possible measures to strengthen India's position in the Indo-Pacific region.

After a long deliberation, the term Indo-Pacific has been adopted in many documents as National Security Strategies and Defense White Papers. It is being widely discussed in think tanks and educational institutions as well. That is why, the term has become "geopolitical nomenclature".⁹ Due to the in-depth study done so far in this direction, a large amount of literature is available.

At the 18th session of the Communist Party of China in November 2012, China stressed on improving its political relations with other countries and resolving differences. China released a new model to promote long-term stability and development. Since then the "new model of major power relations" has been central to China's diplomatic strategy (Wang, 2016)¹⁰. Indo-Pacific region is a hub of global foreign direct investment. In the 21st century, the bilateral trading system is changing to a multilateral trading system. This system will help to remove trade barriers and non-tariff issues. However, for the smooth implementation of reforms in trade agreements, it is necessary that the World Trade Organization function effectively. In this sequence, smooth functioning of mutual relations between different states is also important to maintain global mobility. Due to the increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century, the Asia-Pacific region has entered in a phase where geopolitical changes are taking place rapidly. Therefore, to meet the emerging challenges, the countries of this region have to strengthen mutual alliances and adopt a cooperative attitude.

According to Bmariyani (2013)¹¹, the countries located along the ancient Silk Road are currently the main destinations of investment by China under the Belt and Road Initiative. Hydrocarbons and other minerals are found in sufficient quantities in most of these countries. Some studies have a positive approach. According to them, the extensive investments made by China and Japan in the region will not only benefit these countries but will be also helpful to the developing Asian countries. Countries struggling in the South China Sea are developing their trade ties with China because of the wide range of benefits.

China's interest is to build stable and long-term relations with its neighboring countries. Therefore, China's stability and prosperity will prove to be important for the Indo-Pacific and the world at the geopolitical level. Yang (2005)¹² pointed out that the Theory of China Threat resulted in the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance to prevent the rise of China. By strengthening ties with its traditional allies, the US can maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. The changing geo-politics is another matter of concern for the region. The security and prosperity of the entire region has been threatened by the projects implemented in this region by the two big powers -America and China. China has invested vast amounts of capital in this region through the Belt and Road Initiative policy. The US, on the other hand, is trying to strengthen alliances with its traditional Asian allies. This type of competitive behavior is likely to create a tense situation in the entire region.

Strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region

The term Indo-Pacific was first used in the year 2007 by Gurpreet Khurana, a well-known strategist. In an article he wrote for the Washington Post in 2017, he pointed out that the new term has shifted strategic mind maps globally after China's 'reform open up' initiative in the 1980s (Khurana, G. 2017)¹³. Similarly, in 2011, Shyam Saran, India's former foreign secretary, officially used the term Indo-Pacific to refer to US recognition and interconnected geopolitical advantages. Chacko (2012)¹⁴ has highlighted the fact that the Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific is quite different from that of the US, Japan and Australia. India regards this region as a geo-strategic opportunity. The Indian Defense and Intelligence Agency has also used the term in the direction of developing Indian interests out of the Indian Ocean region into the Indo-Pacific region (Scott, 2012)¹⁵.

As the name suggests, the vast area of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is known as the Indo-Pacific region. Also, the countries located around it are called 'Indo-Pacific countries'. Thus, broadly speaking, the East African coast, the Indian Ocean, and the western and central Pacific Ocean together form the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region is considered highly relevant due to its geographical location and commercial importance. The following conditions enhance the strategic importance of the region:

- Countries located in this region account for about 60% of the global GDP. Thus the region is a major center of global economic activity.
- Currently, this region accounts for more than 75% of global trade. The region is extremely vulnerable due to the presence of energy producing and consuming nations.
- It is known that, the countries which are located in the Indo-Pacific region are accounts for 44% of the world's geographical area and 65 percent of the total world population.

- Experts believe that the region has all the necessary components to create regional trade and investment opportunities that benefit the consumers.
- The geo-economic importance, military activities and competition for natural resources have increased the relevance of this region. The participation of global powers makes it clear that this region will play an important role in determining global security and the new world order.
- The South-China Sea dispute, trade importance of the Straits of Malacca and the presence of pirates in the Arabian region have played an important role in developing the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region. This is the reason why new opportunities of cooperation are being explored by global powers in this region.
- To expand its foreign policy, India is making consistent efforts to improve relations with East and West Asian countries. In such a situation, along with preventing cyber and ground based terrorist activities, India will also have to strengthen its efforts for the security of the maritime region.
- Peaceful and a secure Indo-Pacific region is also needed to provide stability to the ever-increasing political changes in East and West Asia.



Source: <https://bit.ly/3CdnBo5>

India's Perspectives in Indo-Pacific Region

To counter China's aggressive policies, countries such as the US, Australia, Japan and Indonesia considered India's participation is necessary in any strategic framework to be built in the Indo-Pacific region (Academy, S. 2019)¹⁶. That is why they are trying to integrate India in their initiatives. India's presence not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the East China Sea has acknowledged by countries like Philippines and Vietnam. Being a democratic country, India considers it necessary to build a comprehensive framework to ensure peace and security in the region. India strives to build a rules-based, free, fair and secure trade

environment in the Indo-Pacific region. India neither supports expansionist stance like China nor does it want to control China like America. For a long time, American dominance over the Indo-Pacific region was acknowledged. The geopolitical situation in the region has changed due to the increasing activities of China. India wants to protect the region from the domination of big powers. Through trilateral cooperation such as India-Australia-France and India-Australia-Indonesia, India strives to ensure that powers like China and the United States do not establish complete dominance over the region. India is clearly looking for cooperative policies with China, the US and other countries. Through such efforts the peace, security and prosperity can be promoted in the region.

Due to its limited capabilities, India's policies for the region were based on policies of isolation. However, India's policies have changed rapidly over the years. At present, India's policy for the Indo-Pacific region is governed by Indian maritime interests. India has launched the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) Initiative to promote the stability and security of the region. At the same time, India is working on the Sagarmala project to give shape to its strategy, so that its capacity can be increased by strengthening the country's coastal infrastructure. The Government of India has launched the 'O-Smart' scheme for the use of oceans and marine resources. Also, India has declared a National Fisheries Policy for better utilization of fish resources in the aquatic areas. India is now working towards promoting maritime cooperation in a big way to promote a blue economy and develop integrated financial management regions. Thus it can be said that the efforts made by India for the Indo-Pacific region in the last few years reflect the changing policy of India. Due to the importance of this region and the changing global political conditions, it is the need of hour and necessary for India to do so in the present times.

Major security challenges in Indo-Pacific Region

In the above analysis, we have seen that the Indo-Pacific region is important for the whole world due to its macroeconomic and locational importance. Nevertheless, there are many challenges which, in the absence of proper redressal, may hamper the development of this sector. At present the Indo-Pacific region is affected by the following challenges:

Sea-Lane Security: The Indo-Pacific region is affected by global terrorism, extremism, piracy and almost all the challenges related to the security of sea lanes. Countries located in this region are interconnected; therefore, challenges arising in any of its parts can affect the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific region and the international maritime order. For example, the issue of sea-lane security for the entire region, including the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca, has emerged as a major concern due to the vulnerability of choke points. To maintain the smooth transport and trade system in the region, it is necessary to establish a better strategic partnership between the coastal countries.

Non-Compliance to international laws: The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has still not been ratified by the United States. China has refused to accept the dispute settlement mechanism of this convention and has sought reinterpretation of the provisions of this law. Similarly, a complaint was filed against China by the Philippines with the support of the US at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). But China refused to participate in the arbitration proceedings. Many challenges arise due to non-compliance of international legal provisions by the major powers of the world.

South China Sea Dispute: The South China Sea is a major and strategic maritime corridor that connects the ocean and regions located in the Pacific Ocean. But the US-led plan to establish a "free and open Indo-Pacific"¹⁷ region has been challenged by China's unilateral control over the region. To strengthen its claims, China is promoting land-reclamation programs and working for the construction of artificial islands in the region.

Threats to Freedom of Shipping and Maritime: Many countries around the important straits and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Indo-Pacific region are feeling the dangers of Shipping activities and maritime freedoms. Such concerns have been exacerbated by the increased military activity in the region by global powers. Such threats can be countered through the observance, monitoring, regulation and enforcement of international rules.

Concerns related to deep sea mining: Deep sea mining activities have emerged as a major political issue in the Indo-Pacific in recent years due to the richness of marine resources. Valuable metals such as silver, gold, copper, manganese, cobalt, and zinc have been discovered in this region. At present, there is intensifying inter-state competition for obtaining these seabed minerals. There is a need to adopt elaborate regulatory measures to address mining concerns. These measures should include effective ocean-development technologies, sharing the benefits of shared heritage and ensuring environmental protection. In view of the erratic and opaque policies adopted by many countries at the international level with regard to the security of the maritime domain, it can be said that the threats related to the insecurity of the maritime regions have increased. This vulnerability can not only affect the economic activities of human beings, but it also threatens the imbalance of marine ecosystems. In such a situation, seabirds, mammals, seaweeds and other marine natural features will become extinct. Therefore, policies dealing with marine pollution should also be included under maritime security. In addition to the above security concerns, the Indo-Pacific region suffers from problems such as piracy, energy-crises, diplomatic disputes, environmental pollution and degradation of coastal ecosystems.

Possible measures to strengthen India's position in the Indo-Pacific region.

India has broad interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Keeping in view its commercial and strategic importance, India will have to develop a long-term strategy for the region. The

following may be some of the expected measures in this context.

- The powerful nations of the world are working on several strategies to ensure their presence in the region. India is expected to play a more active role in being a part of these strategies and protecting maritime benefits. The Government of India can further expand and strengthen its SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) initiative. At the same time, a detailed and clear framework should be formulated for proper implementation of India's bilateral, trilateral and multilateral agreements for this region.
- Almost all the countries of the world are of the same opinion about free navigability at sea, but there are deep differences in the definition of freedom of navigation in different countries. The reason for this is that the laws of many countries differ from the International Maritime Law (IML). India being a major power in the Indo-Pacific region abides by international maritime law. Thus, India as a credible and responsible country can play a leading role on this issue. Through its efforts, India can end the differences between countries regarding the laws of the sea and persuade them to agree on a definite definition.
- India should increase its reach in the Indo-Pacific region. Through operations, India can firmly establish its presence in the region. This will serve India's long-term interests, as well as strengthen the stability of the region. India already has allies in this region like Japan, who can provide logistic support to India in times of need.
- It is necessary for India to intensify development activities in its coastal areas to ensure its access to the maritime regions. Proper implementation of the Sagarmala Project can prove to be an important step in this direction. Like this, India may also initiate other projects to encourage development, better connectivity and port-based industrialization in the coastal areas. Further, India can promote capacity building in collaboration with other nations for the development of facilities related to manufacturing, trade and tourism in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The government should also consider the possibility of building a study center dedicated to the Indo-Pacific region. If possible, such a center can be established in Andaman and Nicobar Islands in which various courses related to this field should be included. Such a center can be constructed on the basis of public-private partnership model. This will help in judicious use of resources and promotion of expertise.

From the time of the discovery of sea routes, maritime zones have been considered a successful medium of diplomacy between different countries. India can gain an edge in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region by promoting negotiation activities with other countries. To ensure its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, India has started partnerships in

organizations such as the Quad. These organizations may help in strengthening India's strategic position. Along with above efforts, the country needs to find such other international and bilateral cooperation's to enhance its technical and development activities. India can move in this direction through bilateral agreements also.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above study, we see that maritime security and cooperation at the international level has increased in the last few years. Various countries and organizations have issued a number of joint statements regarding the Indo-Pacific region, in which priority has been given to increase mutual cooperation. On the one hand, China is changing its policy and insisting on an equal and full-fledged world order. But, on the other hand, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report published by the US advocates for rules-based international order and Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Also, The Indo-Pacific maritime region is important not only for the wider countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, but also for the countries of Europe, Africa, and North and South America, which lie along the Atlantic Ocean coast. Transport and trade between the above countries operates with ease through the Indo-Pacific region. In this way, this region works to connect interdependent global economies. This type of economic system can be operated smoothly only when the security of the maritime regions can be ensured. At the same time, it will also help in maintaining the global balance of power.

In the midst of the above circumstances, India has to be aware of its economic and security interests. For India to increase its international participation, it is necessary that it also plays an important role in the Indo-Pacific region. India can achieve a strong position in this area through international and bilateral cooperation. To balance China's expansionist policies, it is necessary for India to move towards regional and bilateral agreements with its neighboring countries. By this way, India can be successful in fulfilling its interests despite China's expansionist policies in the Indo-Pacific region and the tension between China and America. Being surrounded by sea on three sides, India's industrial, commercial and political activities are clearly influenced by the geo-strategic location of the Indian Ocean (Ballabh, 2013)¹⁸. India can safeguard its interests in the Indian Ocean only if it plays a decisive role in Indo-Pacific region. For equitable distribution of security benefits, it is necessary to promote collective efforts with all countries located in the region (Mwagiru, 2004)¹⁹. With this approach, the number of member countries of the Quad can also be increased. Peace and stability are necessary for the progress of economic and other activities in any region. Building international trust is critical to ensuring long-term security in the Indo-Pacific region. On the basis of international trust, regional conflicts in the region can be prevented from escalating.

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