

The Big Picture: India's Vision for Indo-Pacific

Summary

Date: 12th Dec 2020

Reading Time: 20 Minutes

Topics covered from the syllabus:

- **GS-2:**
 - India and its neighbourhood- relations.
 - Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

Note

- Following is the summary of 'The Big Picture' discussion, which was aired on RSTV.
- Host: Frank Rausan Pereira
- Panellists: Ashok Sajjanhar, Former Ambassador; Vice Admiral (Retd.) Satish Soni, Former Commander-in-chief, Southern and Eastern Command; Maj. Gen. Dhruv Katoch (Retd), Director, India foundation.
- Please note that some inputs have been given by our team in order to make the topic more relevant to UPSC.

Context

- After **Russia referred to India as an 'object' in the west's aggressive policy against China**, India's external affairs ministry has clarified that India has an independent foreign policy. It also said that **India's foreign policy with any country is independent** of its relations with any third country.
 - The Russian posture has been understood to be a reference towards India's participation in the **Quad – a grouping of India, US, Japan and Australia**.
- PM Modi has earlier said that India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a space for making strategies or forming groupings to dominate the region.
- Apart from that, Chief of the Indian army had earlier pointed to the **deployment of foreign warships in the Indian Ocean region**. He also said that a race has begun for the **acquisition of strategic bases** in the region.

Prelims Focus

Indo-Pacific Ocean's initiative: It is an Indian initiative for **safe, stable and secure maritime domain**, especially the Indo-Pacific ocean region.

- The focus areas include **enhancement of security, cooperation in disaster management and sustainable use of marine resources**.
- India has been in the pursuit of a **rules-based international order** in which countries abide by the awards of global dispute resolution mechanisms and there is a peaceful resolution of the disputes.

Nine-dash line: It is an imaginary, vague line which **represents Chinese claims** over the South China sea.

- This line has led China into **border disputes** with neighbouring countries including Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan.
- At the heart of the dispute is the resource-rich region surrounding **Paracel and Spratly islands**. China has led claims over the islands, but they are rejected by the majority of the members of the international community.

Mains Focus

Importance of the Indian Ocean Region:

- **Historical importance:** The Indian Ocean has been one of the **most important Sea Lane of Communication (SLOCs)** for trade due to the faster development in the region since ancient times. The trade between the African nations, the Indian sub-continent and the East Asian countries including China kept the seas busy during early times.
- **Race for domination:** After the entry of Europeans, Indian Ocean saw a **race for dominance and search for strategic bases** to exploit the resources and control the trade of the region. The earliest explorers in the region were **Portuguese**. However, it was **British** who could establish a far greater influence over the region due to their blue-water navy. **After world war II, it has been the US**, which has been regarded as the top power in the region due to its superior naval capacity. However, off late, the control of the Indian Ocean has been diffused in an **increasingly multi-lateral world**.
- **String of Pearls:** China has established multiple bases in the Indian Ocean Region as a part of its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**. For e.g. recently China acquired the Djibouti base, in addition to the already existing Gwadar port, which is in the advanced stages of development. Also, there are a number of logistics bases of China in the region. For e.g. the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Kyakpyu port in Myanmar etc.

Potential of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD:

- **Origin of Quad:** Most experts point to **China's assertive behaviour** in its neighbourhood as well as with the western countries as the prime reason for upgradation of a military exercise, namely Malabar, to an institutional mechanism like Quad. Though Malabar Exercise and the Quad are not linked, they have a similar membership structure. This lends a strategic depth to the Quad.
- **Early stages of Quad:** Despite various debates surrounding its aim and potential, Quad is still in its early stages. It is expected that going forward, cooperation within the grouping would strengthen in diverse areas and it would be beneficial for its members. Experts have also opined that **it can be institutionalised** by establishing a secretariat.
- **Broadening the membership:** There are also suggestions of a possible extension in the membership of the grouping by inviting like-minded countries. For e.g. a strong contender for the membership of Quad is Singapore, which has strong relations with almost all the countries involved in the Quad. Apart from that, South Korea has also been fairly enthusiastic to be its part.
- **Creating favourable Perceptions:** To a large extent, the future of Quad depends upon its perceived intentions and the **goodwill it generates among the smaller nations**. For e.g., if the Quad succeeds in scoring the support of small countries of Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), it will be a **moral victory** for the members of the Quad, as it will demonstrate the efficacy of the grouping in pursuing diverse objectives, rather than being a grouping to contain Chinese expansion.

Current state of India- Russia relations:

- **India's defence relations with Russia:** India's relations with Russia are strategic in nature. They are not just limited to the **procurement of weapon systems** but have also been extended to the **joint development of weapon platforms**. For e.g. Brahmos supersonic cruise missile.
- **Energy Relations:** India has acquired a stake in **Russian oil fields** like Sakhalin-I. Also, India is involved with Russia in **joint construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant** in Bangladesh. Similarly, Kudankulam nuclear power plant has been set up with Russian technology.
- **Impact of recent events:** Russia has expressed its reservations about India's close participation with western countries in the global groupings like Quad. However, India has been constantly **reaching out to the Russians** through various media:
 - During the **Shangri-La Dialogue**, **PM Modi clarified** that the aim of Quad is to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region and it is not a grouping directed against any particular country.
 - India has also floated the '**Indo-Pacific ocean's initiative**' (see inset) to assuage Russian concerns.
 - Similarly, it has also tried to make Russia aware of its intentions to **ensure freedom of access to the global commons**, at the bilateral level.
 - However, experts have opined that **Russia's deteriorating relations with Western** countries have left it with no choice but to toe China's line. This is increasingly visible in Russian reference to the Global Times – considered to be the mouthpiece of the Chinese government.
- **Russian Response:** Till now, Russia has shied away from directly confronting the Indian government or even calling out India at global forums. This points to the Russian interest in maintaining the bilateral ties and strong defence relations with India. An Indian tilt away from Russia would cost it dearly as **India is one of the largest purchasers of Russian weapon systems**.
 - At the same time, Russia has found it convenient to move towards China as its interests converge with China in keeping dominance of the west at bay. This is bound to come in conflict with India sooner or later.
- **Russia's tilt towards China:** Despite India's statement claiming that the Galwan valley incident, in particular, and the border standoff, in general, are premeditated incidents, Russia has given a clean chit to China. This does not augur well for the future of Indo-Russia relations.

Issues with China's foreign policy:

- **Chinese expansionist policy:** China has not only been involved in a border standoff with India but has also attempted to strong-arm its smaller East and South-east Asian neighbours through the concept of **nine-dash line** (see inset). China has now asked the ships and the flights passing over the disputed territory in the South China sea to seek permission before passing through the region.
- **Chinese cherry-picking of the agreements:** Despite India's reservations about the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through sovereign Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir**, China has been persistent in expanding the connectivity project. At the same time, when it comes to India's genuine interests in the Chinese neighbourhood, China has not been much accommodative. For e.g. India's exploration of oil and gas reserves in Vietnamese territory was frowned upon by China.
- **Global distrust towards China:** It is not just India and the other Asian countries which have been in a conflict with China, but the western countries like the US and members of European community have also been engaged in various standoffs with China. For e.g., many countries have ousted or decreased the stake of Chinese technology giant **Huawei in the expansion of 5G networks**, in response to allegations of cyber theft against China.

- **China's misuse of its manufacturing capabilities:** China has selectively refused to supply the PPE kits to countries who have asked for an **impartial enquiry into the origins of the virus**. This demonstrates the extents to which China may go in pursuit of its self-interest. Similarly, it has blatantly disregarded its relations with Australia and increased its hostility, for the same reason.

Way Forward

- **Addressing China's adventurism holistically:** There is a need for India to respond to Chinese overtures in its neighbourhood in a holistic manner. China has been involved with almost all its southern and eastern neighbours in boundary disputes. There needs to be a **unified strategy and a common agenda** to contain Chinese expansionist strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Providing hedging opportunity:** Most countries in the region count on India to **balance out Chinese hegemony** in the region. For e.g., smaller nations of South Asia, as well as, South East Asia are looking to counter Chinese influence by strengthening their own ties with India. For e.g. India was also offered the membership of ASEAN, but India refused citing geopolitical constraints. In such a situation, India needs to **leverage upon its goodwill and growing soft power** to strengthen its image as a global power.
- **Calling out China's bluff:** India needs to demonstrate to Russia and the other nations that Quad is not a result of its cooperation with the West. Instead, it is an outcome of Chinese aggression in the Ladakh region and in the South China Sea. Therefore, instead of pointing its finger towards India, Russia must confront the Chinese about their overtures in the Indian territory. It is important to **confront the bullying tactics of China** on all levels, lest it continues with its expansionist policy in its neighbourhood.
- **Upgrading Indian navy to a blue-water navy:** With China's increased assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and a scramble for bases (even Russian has acquired a base in Sudan recently), India needs to realise the **inherent importance of the Indian Ocean region**. There is a need for strengthening the capabilities of Indian navy to ward off threats and be pre-emptive of other countries' efforts to control the Indian Ocean.
 - Also, it is time to **shed historical hesitation** in allowing other like-minded nations to have deployments in the Indian Ocean Region. The flaw in the Indian foreign policy is that it is not letting its friends aid itself in the Indian Ocean region as they are sensitive to Indian concerns, while at the same time, it is unable to stop its adversaries from dominating the region.
- **Net security Provider:** India has traditionally been the power on which small countries in the Indian Ocean Region have depended upon. For e.g. Indian navy supplied **fresh water to Maldives** when its Reverse Osmosis plant failed. Similarly, Indian military thwarted the attempts of mercenaries for a coup in Maldives in 1988 under **Operation Cactus**. It is important to maintain this dependency for strengthening Indian position in the region.
- **Peaceful resolution of disputes:** India has believed in resolving the disputes in a friendly manner as is manifested in its complete acceptance of the **Permanent Court of Arbitration's award** in favour of Bangladesh in the Indo-Bangladesh marine boundary arbitration. On the contrary, China did not accede to a similar award in case of China-Philippines territory dispute in the South China sea. This has created an atmosphere of distrust against the Chinese.

Operation Cactus (1988): In 1988, a Maldivian group led by Abdullah Luthufi attempted to **overthrow the government in Maldives**.

- This coup was supported by the armed mercenaries of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a Sri Lankan Tamil secessionist organisation.
- On the request of Maldivian government, **Indian armed forces intervened**, which led to the failure of attempted coup.

Conclusion

- India has been clear about the **importance of rules-based order and freedom of navigation** in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Also, there is a need to invest in **synergy in global groupings** like Quad, to restrict the expansion of China in the Indian Ocean regions. We have to put military backing to the Quad and have an agenda to garner support from the small nations of Indian Ocean region as well as ASEAN.

Practice Question

- India's role as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region required huge investments in blue-water capabilities of its navy. Discuss, in light of 'String of Pearls Theory'.

UPSC Previous Year Question

- Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of the Indian Government to improve relationship with its neighbors. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss. (GS2 – 2015)
- With respect to the South China sea, maritime territorial disputes and rising tension affirm the need for safeguarding maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region. In this context, discuss the bilateral issues between India and China. (GS2 – 2014)
- What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. (GS2 – 2013)

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