



Indo-Pacific

For Prelims: HACGAM, South China Sea, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Rare earth metals

For Mains: Significance of the Indo-Pacific

Why in News?

Emphasising sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth while preserving the ecosystem's health, the Defence Minister of India during the **18th Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM)** in New Delhi said India stands for open and rule-based maritime borders in Indo-Pacific.

What is the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM)?

- It is an apex level forum facilitating the congregation of all the major Coast Guard Agencies of the Asian region, it was established in 2004.
- It is a **multilateral forum of 23 countries** including Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkiye, Vietnam and one Region i.e., Hong Kong (China).
- The [Indian Coast Guard](#) (ICG) is hosting the 18th HACGAM in coordination with the HACGAM Secretariat.
- A total of 55 representatives from 18 countries and two International Organisations — **Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre** (ReCAAP ISC) and [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - Global Maritime Crime Programme](#) (UNODC-GMCP) are participating in the meeting.

What is the Indo-Pacific Region?

- **About:**
 - Indo-Pacific is a recent concept. It was about a decade ago that the world started talking about the Indo-Pacific; 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. The **majority of the world's trade passes through these oceans**.
- **Significance:**
 - The Indo-Pacific region is one of the **most populous and economically active regions of the world** which includes four continents: Asia, Africa, Australia and America.
 - The dynamism and vitality of the region is self-evident, **60% of the world's population**

- and **2/3rd of the global economic output** makes this region a global economic centre.
- The region is also a **great source and destination for [Foreign Direct Investment](#)**. Many of the world's critical and large supply chains have an Indo-Pacific connection.
- There are **vast reserves of marine resources in the Indian and Pacific Oceans combined**, including offshore hydrocarbons, methane hydrates, seabed minerals and **[rare earth metals](#)**.
 - Sizable coastlines and **[Exclusive Economic Zones \(EEZs\)](#)** provide littoral countries with competitive capabilities for exploiting these resources.
 - In turn, a number of the world's largest economies are located in the Indo-Pacific region, including India, U.S.A, China, Japan, Australia.

What is India's Perspective of the Indo-Pacific?

- **Cooperate with Others for Security Architecture:** A lot of India's special partners, the US, Australia, Japan and Indonesia 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.
- **Indo-Pacific Extends from Africa to America:** 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.
- **Equal Share in Trade and Investment:** 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 \(RCEP\)](#)**.
- **Unified ASEAN:** 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.
- **Work in Collaboration with China:** 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.
- **Against Dominance of a Single Player:** 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. India doesn't want hegemony of any player in the region.

What are the Current Challenges in the Indo-Pacific?

- **Theatre of Geo-Strategic Competition:** Indo-Pacific is the principal theatre of geo-strategic competition between different multilateral institutions like **[QUAD](#)** and **[Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#)**.
- **China's Militarization Move:** China has been a challenge to India's interests and stability in the Indian Ocean. India's neighbours are receiving military and infrastructural assistance from China, including submarines for Myanmar, frigates for Sri Lanka, and its **[overseas military base in Djibouti \(Horn of Africa\)](#)**.
 - Also, China has a hold over **[Hambantota port \(Sri Lanka\)](#)**, which is just a few hundred miles off the shores of India.
- **Hotspot For Non-Traditional Issues:** The region's vastness makes it difficult to assess and address multiple risks, including incidents of piracy, **[trafficking](#)** and **[terrorism](#)**.
 - The Indo-Pacific region is facing serious challenges related to geographical and ecological stability due to **[climate change](#)** and the three consecutive **[La Niña events](#)** that are causing **[cyclones](#)** and **[tsunamis](#)**.
 - Also, illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and **[marine pollution](#)** is hampering the aquatic life of this region.
- **India's Limited Naval Capacity:** **[Indian Navy](#)** has limited resources and capacity to strengthen its efforts because of limited allocation of Indian military budget. Also, lack of overseas military bases creates a fundamental logistical challenge for India to maintain its presence in the Indo-Pacific.

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.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Questions (PYQ)

Mains

Q. The new tri-nation partnership AUKUS is aimed at countering China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. Is it going to supersede the existing partnerships in the region? Discuss the strength and impact of AUKUS in the present scenario. **(2021)**

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