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## The Big Picture: Indo-Pacific Maritime Security

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**India stated that it would expand maritime security cooperation with Vietnam amid China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea and growing ambitions in the Bay of Bengal region.** India and Vietnam agreed to strengthen bilateral strategic cooperation in defense, oil and gas sectors as President Ram Nath Kovind held productive and extensive talks with his Vietnam counterpart. Both leaders restated the importance of building a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in respect of national sovereignty and international law.

### Vietnam and Indo Pacific Maritime Security

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- The present trend shows that Vietnam is hesitant to take an active role with regards to Indo-Pacific. **One of the reasons being the evolving geopolitics of the region. The geopolitical philosophies of both the China and America are contradictory.**
- Consequently, the Vietnamese are reluctant to take a definite position in the decisions related to Indo-Pacific. **To ally with India in any form would give a strategic boost to the US and India's stand of free passage in the South China Sea.**
- Another important reason why the Vietnamese are reluctant to engage with India is that the ASEAN countries as a political entity do not believe in the concept of Indo-Pacific, as the concept is backed by the QUAD ( QUAD is an informal strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India). **ASEAN countries believe that when the Asia Pacific was expanded by the Trump Administration to Indo-Pacific it took away the focus from ASEAN.**
- Hence, they deliberately shy away from those aspects which highlight strategic and military aspect. However, they are eager to do more on trade and commerce.
- **Vietnam has said that they do not want the QUAD to get developed into a military alliance.**

## India and ASEAN

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- The relationship between India and the ASEAN members is growing stronger by the day. **India being inducted as a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, is one of the examples of growing closeness.**
- The Act East policy of India consolidated the relationship between the ASEAN and India. Initially, it was limited to only trade and investment. Now, other dimensions like counter insurgency, cyber and maritime security, connectivity etc. have been included.
- The Indian administration has been categorical in focusing on the centrality of the ASEAN. It was evident in Indian Prime Minister' Shangri La Dialogue.

## The coalition between Like-Minded Countries in the Indo-Pacific

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- **As per the present situation, we cannot state whether or not the countries are coming together to form an alliance against the Chinese.**
- **The Vietnamese, for example, are more connected with the Chinese than any other country, owing to its proximity to China.** Hence, the warmth shown to India cannot be misconstrued as an alliance. Similarly, the case with Myanmar and Indonesia where Chinese proximity is too close for India to build any coalition force.
- India has categorically allayed any Chinese fear by saying that she has no intention to upset the apple cart. **The Indian Prime Minister has always focused on SAGAR – Security, And Growth for all in the Region.**
- Chinese do not have any fear for QUAD as the grouping is in the nascent stage of its development. However, it does have its apprehensions as to what it might develop to in the future.

- **China has only the South China Sea as the opening to the outside world. And in that sense QUAD has immense potential as it can hinder China's gateway to the world.**

## Role of China in Indo-Pacific

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- China has a huge stake in the Indo-Pacific, as most of the trade is done through this region. Besides, they have invested heavily in the Belt and Road Initiative.
- **The ASEAN countries also have a well-knit relationship with the Chinese. Hence, in spite of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) verdict (which went against China) the Chinese reclaimed most of the islands in the South China Sea and have also built maritime infrastructure.**
- The advancement by the Chinese was done without firing a single bullet. The US does realize now that the Chinese gradually are becoming a force which can challenge the US strategic interest in the Indo Pacific.

## BIMSTEC and the US

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- The USA announced that it will identify collaborative opportunities with Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) where India plays a pivotal role to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific region amid China's ambitious moves to dominate the region.
- The US State Department also announced that it is expanding maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, including through the new Bay of Bengal Initiative. India is the biggest country in the Bay of Bengal and principal security provider in the region.
- Gradually, BIMSTEC has replaced SAARC and has all the components of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) except problematic Pakistan. This forum is being developed by the present government to further consolidate India's interest in the Indo-Pacific.
- Both the Chinese and the US are interested in the platform BIMSTEC because it is vibrant, promising, unlike SAARC which is characterized by lethargy.

## Conclusion

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- There is a growing concern about China's looming presence in the South China Sea and **like-minded countries are apprehensive of China's aspirations.**
- However, because of too much focus on containing China, there are other issues that are being neglected. ASEAN countries are eager to focus on issues like **trade, investment, overfishing, piracy, disaster management, and cybersecurity.** In this regard, BIMSTEC can become a facilitative platform to enhance engagement with the world in general and the ASEAN member countries in particular.