

ASEAN's Reclamation of Indo-Pacific

What is the issue?

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is intending to reclaim its position in the Indo-Pacific region.

What is the current situation?

- The **geopolitical contestation** between China and the U.S. is escalating in the Indo-Pacific region now.
- So, it has become **imperative for the ASEAN** to underscore its centrality in the emerging regional order.
- The ASEAN member states have finally managed to articulate a collective vision for the region in its **non-binding document**.
- It is titled as "The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific".

What the document is about?

- It underlines the need for an **inclusive and rules-based framework** to generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region.
- It says that the **rise of material powers** (economic and military) **requires avoiding** the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game.

What is its significance?

- It could **complement existing frameworks** of cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels.
- It could **generate tangible and concrete deliverables** for the benefit of the region's peoples.
- Despite **individual differences and bilateral engagements** ASEAN states have with the U.S. and China, the regional grouping can now claim to have a common approach as far as the Indo-Pacific region is concerned.
- Though there were **divisions among ASEAN member states** in the run-up to the summit, they still managed to come up with this document.

What is the significance of the China Sea?

- South China Sea is an increasingly **contested maritime space**, claimed by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- So, it is interesting that these ASEAN members have agreed to push for a quick conclusion of a Code of Conduct in the region.
- It has been pushed into articulating its formal response after other major regional players began laying their cards on the table.

Who are the regional players trying to influence?

- **United States of America (USA)** - U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy report which focusses on preserving a FOIP in the face of a more “assertive China”.
- **Japan** - Released its Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept in 2016.
- **Australia** - Released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017, detailing its Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity.
- **India** - Indo-Pacific vision was shown at the Shangri-la Dialogue, 2018.
- India even setup an Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) earlier this year.

Why was ASEAN reluctant to engage before?

- ASEAN had the **perception** that it may **antagonise China** if it engages with the Indo-Pacific discourse.
- But there was soon a realisation that such an approach might allow others to shape the regional architecture and marginalise the ASEAN.

What is the framework of the outlook?

- It doesn't see the Indo-Pacific as one continuous territorial space.
- It emphasises **development and connectivity**, underlining the need for maritime cooperation, infrastructure connectivity and broader economic cooperation.
- The ASEAN says, it would seek to avoid making the region a platform for major power competition.
- Instead its frame of reference is **economic cooperation and dialogue**.
- **Aim of ASEAN's approach**- Placating China by not allowing itself to align with the U.S.'s vision for the region completely.

What is India's stance?

- India has **welcomed the ASEAN's outlook** as it sees “important elements of convergence” with its own approach towards the region.
- India is trying to carefully calibrate its relations with the U.S. and China in this region.

- On the sidelines of the recent G-20 Summit in Japan, India held discussions on the Indo-Pacific region with U.S. and Japan, with a focus on improving regional connectivity and infrastructure development.

Source: The Hindu

Quick Facts

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

- ASEAN is a group of 10 member countries that encourages political, economic, and social cooperation in the South East Asian region.
- **Members** - Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- **1 Observer** - Papua New Guinea.
- **Objectives** - As per the ASEAN Declaration,
 1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region.
 2. To promote regional peace and stability.
- **Fundamental goals** - Cooperative peace and shared prosperity.

Zero-sum game

- In game theory and economic theory, a zero-sum game is a mathematical representation of a situation in which each participant's gain or loss of utility is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the utility of the other participants.
- If the total gains of the participants are added up and the total losses are subtracted, they will sum to zero.