

Mapping the greater southeast Asia, the core part of Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific: India's position in it

Abstract

International politics is inherently more unstable than national politics, and it has been constantly evolving. Unlike national politics, which often follows more predictable patterns, the dynamics of international relations do not operate through simple, one-dimensional causes. Long-term, fixed policies are unsustainable in the global arena, as alliances and rivalries are fluid; there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies. As we enter the 21st century, international politics has entered a new phase, one that cannot be fully explained by past events. After the Cold War, the center of global political power shifted from Europe to the Asia-Pacific, and more specifically to the Indo-Pacific region. This shift marks what could be called the "Asian Century" or, more precisely, the "Indo-Pacific Century," reflecting the growing influence of powerful nations such as China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, India, and ASEAN countries.

Keywords: Asian century, Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia, look east policy, act east policy

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Introduction

The importance of the sea in today's world is constantly increasing and has become a major focus of competition for various countries. There are abundant natural resources under the sea, such as oil, gas, minerals, and other raw materials.¹ Countries are seeking to establish control over these resources so that they can strengthen their economies. For example, the South China Sea has huge reserves of oil and gas, which have caused disputes between various countries. A large part of the trade is carried out by sea. The cost of transporting goods by sea is relatively low and it is an important means of global trade. For example, the Strait of Malacca, the Suez Canal, and the Panama Canal—these sea routes are very important for international trade.² Therefore, gaining control over the sea has also become a military strategic issue. Strong navies and submarine forces are a large part of the military power of countries.³ Many countries compete over maritime borders, such as the tension between China and other neighbouring countries in the South China Sea and the competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean. In addition, biodiversity and fossil resources Marine biodiversity is also an important source of competition. Fish, marine animals, and other biodiversity provide nutrients and commercial profits. In addition, fossil resources of the ocean (e.g., sea salt, methane hydrates, etc.) are of interest to various countries. In addition, changes in temperature and sea level are having a huge impact on the environment. Competition in ocean research and climate change is also an important aspect.⁴ Countries want to be in the best position in ocean-related research. This competition is giving rise to territorial disputes. Maritime disputes are ongoing in various regions of the world, such as India-China, China-Taiwan, and China-Vietnam. These countries are competing with each other over maritime borders, sea lanes, and subsoil resources.⁵ All of this makes control of the ocean and its resources very important for the security, economy, and military power of the country. As a result, the ocean has become not only a means of transportation but also the center of geopolitical competition. From that perspective, we are going to discuss Greater Southeast Asia and its geopolitical importance.⁶

Research objectives

World politics in the 21st century is experiencing considerable uncertainty. On the one hand, the erosion of the US's monopolistic

hegemony and the rise of China as one of the world's leading economic and military powers in that vacuum have created extreme uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific region. The objective of this discussion is to highlight the importance of Greater Southeast Asia from this perspective. The objective of this article is to examine several key areas:

- The evolving dynamics of the Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific region
- The emergence of the Greater Southeast Asia region as a new center of global geopolitical power.
- India's growing influence in this changing Indo-Pacific region.

Research questions

The following research questions can be formulated. These are:

- How did the Indo-Pacific region become so important in international politics?
- In what ways is Greater Southeast Asia significant?
- How did India emerge as one of the key players in Greater Southeast Asia?

Research methodology

This research utilizes the content analysis method to examine the increasing geopolitical significance of Greater Southeast Asia. The content being analyzed includes a variety of sources, such as government documents (including agreements and contracts), joint press releases from ministers, and perspectives shared by scholars, among others. Through this approach, the study aims to gain insights into the region's evolving political and strategic role.

Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

The term "Asia-Pacific" gained significant prominence in global geopolitical and economic discussions during the 1980s. In this period, major players like the USA, ASEAN, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) played influential yet limited regional roles. The Asia-Pacific is often defined as a vast area that includes various sub-regions of Asia, such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia—along with

countries like Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. During the Cold War, the world was largely divided between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and the Asia-Pacific region was no exception to this divide. Liberal democratic nations such as Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia tended to align with the US, while socialist countries like China, North Vietnam, and North Korea supported the Soviet Union. However, after the dissolution of the USSR, the global balance of power shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar world, with the US as the dominant force. In the post-Cold War era, China's growing influence has significantly altered the global security landscape. As a result, the term "Indo-Pacific" has gradually replaced "Asia-Pacific" in strategic discourse. This shift reflects the region's increasing significance as a center for international trade and global geopolitical competition, drawing the attention of major world powers.⁷ India's maritime security immensely depends up on Japan and the USA due to QUAD.^{8,9} The term "Asia-Pacific" gained significant prominence in global geopolitical and economic discussions during the 1980s. In this period, major players like the USA, ASEAN, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) played influential yet limited roles in the region. The Asia-Pacific is often defined as a vast area that includes various sub-regions of Asia- such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia- along with countries like Russia, Australia, and New Zealand. During the Cold War, the world was largely divided between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and the Asia-Pacific region was no exception to this divide. Liberal democratic nations such as Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia tended to align with the US, while socialist countries like China, North Vietnam, and North Korea supported the Soviet Union. However, after the dissolution of the USSR, the global balance of power shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar world, with the US as the dominant force. In the post-Cold War era, China's growing influence has significantly altered the global security landscape. As a result, the term "Indo-Pacific" has gradually replaced "Asia-Pacific" in strategic discourse. This shift reflects the region's increasing significance as a center for international trade and global geopolitical competition, drawing the attention of major world powers. By the late 1990s, the Asia-Pacific region had become a central focus in both global and regional geopolitics. The end of the Cold War ushered in a shift in the balance of power, marked by the rise of a stronger China, a weakened Russia, a somewhat disengaged United States, and the continued growth of South Korea, Japan, and a potentially emerging India. With the Cold War's conclusion, the focus of global politics gradually shifted toward Asia, particularly East and South Asia, which began to be seen as a new arena for power dynamics. In this context, China has asserted itself as a formidable global power, actively challenging the previously unipolar world order dominated by the United States. As a result, the Asia-Pacific region has become a crucial strategic space for China, with its growing economic and military capabilities positioning it as a significant competitor to U.S. influence on the global.¹⁰ The presence of the US navy in the Indo-Pacific was concern of India's maritime security. However, since 1991, India and the USA has built a close ties in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ The term "Indo-Pacific" generally refers to the combined areas of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, encompassing the nations located along their coastlines. However, the strategic understanding of this region is more complex. There is significant debate about its exact boundaries, and not all coastal countries along these two oceans are included in the region. Each country with a vested interest in the Indo-Pacific shapes its own interpretation of the region, often based on specific geographical, political, and economic considerations. Consequently, varying national interests have led to different conceptualizations of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific.¹²

Define Indo-Pacific

Australia was the first country to officially incorporate the term "Indo-Pacific" into its strategic documents in October 2012, where it depicted the Western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean as part of a strategic arc. Japan was also among the early nations to conceptualize a regional framework known as the Indo-Pacific, which it defines to include South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific Island nations.¹³ For India, the Indo-Pacific is seen as the eastern extension of the Indian Ocean. As India's Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, explained, "For India, it is the logical next step beyond Act East and a transcending of the confines of South Asia".¹⁴ Meanwhile, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provided a broad definition of the Indo-Pacific region, describing it as extending "from the Indian subcontinent to the Western shores of America, spanning two oceans- the Pacific and the Indian". Japan's shifting foreign policy to South Asia has created a new dimension of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵

Why greater Southeast Asia?

The definition of the Indo-Pacific region remains a subject of debate, but it is widely acknowledged that the core of this region is Greater Southeast Asia. In recent years, this maritime area has become central to security and strategic discussions, particularly due to China's increasing assertiveness in the region. The growing regional and international focus on security in the Indo-Pacific, aimed at containing China's expansion, is fundamentally a response to China's aggressive actions in the waters of Greater Southeast Asia. Ongoing territorial disputes in these waters have further heightened tensions related to maritime security. It is important to clarify that Greater Southeast Asia refers to the area stretching from India's Andaman Sea to the South China Sea, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tomohiko Taniguchi, Special Advisor to Japan's former Prime Minister Abe, argued that the geographical location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands places India within the Southeast Asia region.¹⁶ Additionally, a Singapore-based company, using the term Greater Southeast Asia (GSEA) for its business scope, included Taiwan and the South China Sea, reflecting the region's significance. Today, this area holds a crucial place in India's foreign policy, especially concerning maritime security. India's interests are undeniably central to the politics of Greater Southeast Asia. The United States has sought to balance China's growing global influence, and India is expected to play a significant role in this balancing act in the region. In February 2020, US President Donald Trump, during his "Namaste Trump" event at Motera Stadium, emphasized that the United States should be India's primary defense partner, underscoring the shared goal of maintaining sovereignty, security, and a free and open Indo-Pacific for future generations.¹⁷ However, both China and Russia have rejected the strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific. This evolving situation has made the Indo-Pacific region a key arena in the global power struggle, with the balance of power now shifting toward new dynamics where India is emerging as a major player. As India strengthens its financial and military capabilities, its growing role in the region is increasingly significant. The Indo-Pacific, or the geopolitical focus of Indo-Pacific politics, revolves around the region of Greater Southeast Asia. India is currently working to enhance its presence in this area, playing a more prominent role in the broader Indo-Pacific framework. This is why India, along with some ASEAN countries, emphasizes ASEAN centrality in discussions about the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia, as the central hub of the Indo-Pacific, has become critical not only for trade but also for military strategy in the foreign policies of many countries. Recently, countries like the

United States, Japan, Australia, India, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France have taken initiatives to protect freedom of navigation, with a particular focus on the Greater Southeast Asia region. China's aggressive foreign policy has raised concerns about the freedom of navigation in these waters.¹⁸ Today, Greater Southeast Asia is at the heart of global trade, making it a focal point for countries worldwide. Every nation is focused on how to address China's growing influence, and India has joined this global effort. While the term Indo-Pacific is used as a broad geopolitical reference, the true area of focus remains Greater Southeast Asia. India's historical relationship with Southeast Asia, rooted in maritime connections, underscores the importance of secure sea routes for both regions. To ensure the continued strength of their relationship, India and Southeast Asia must work together to safeguard these vital maritime corridors.¹⁹

Mapping greater southeast Asia

To gain a clearer understanding of the Greater Southeast Asia region, it is helpful to divide it into several sub-regions:

- a) East Asia: This includes China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula.
- b) Southeast Asia: The nations located in the southeast part of Asia, generally south of China and east of India, are part of this sub-region.
- c) Australia and New Zealand: This region consists of the countries located in Oceania, specifically Australia and New Zealand.
- d) Pacific Islands: This sub-region includes the various island nations and territories scattered across the Pacific Ocean.

East Asia: this includes China, Japan, and the Korean peninsula

The modern era of East Asia began with a significant transformation. On one side, there was the powerful West, driven by advances in technology and science, while on the other side, three East Asian nations- China, Japan, and Korea- remained entrenched in ancient traditions and stagnation. To protect themselves from the growing influence of the West, these countries initially cut off all external contacts, adopting a policy of isolation. However, Western imperialist powers persistently attempted to breach the closed doors of East Asia. The East Asia that emerged after World War II was drastically different from the region a century earlier. Two major changes stand out in China and Japan. China, once perceived as weak, re-emerged as a powerful force, reclaiming some of its historical expansionist tendencies. In contrast, Japan, which had been devastated by war, chose a path of peace and recovery. These transformations were striking. Meanwhile, both North and South Korea managed to maintain their distinct identities, despite their proximity to China. After World War II, Russia's influence became evident in North Korea, while the U.S. Navy's presence in Japan and South Korea introduced a new dynamic to the cultures of these nations. While North Korea struggled to achieve economic development, South Korea experienced remarkable economic growth. Among these nations, Japan, having recovered from the devastation of World War II, emerged as a global economic power, marked by rapid industrialization and progress.

Southeast Asia: the nations located in the southeast part of Asia, generally south of China and east of India, are part of this sub-region

Southeast Asia is often referred to as the gateway connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The region is crucial due to several factors,

including its economy, population, water routes, trade and commerce, and its strategic position linking the West with Asia. It contains critical chokepoints that connect the South China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean. Southeast Asian nations also hold a significant military and strategic position in global politics. For countries like China, South Korea, and Japan—major exporters to Europe, Africa, and North America- using the vital shipping lanes through Southeast Asia is essential for reaching their consumer markets. Similarly, Middle Eastern countries that supply crude oil, natural gas, and other resources must also rely on these shipping routes to transport goods. India has long utilized these waterways for trade with Southeast Asia and the Pacific region. These shipping lines facilitate the movement of trillions of dollars' worth of goods, oil, and gas each year. Therefore, if these routes were to be blocked or disrupted, the global import-export trade of the major economic powers would be severely impacted, potentially crippling their economies.²⁰

Australia and New Zealand: this region consists of the countries located in Oceania, specifically Australia and New Zealand

The Australia-New Zealand region comprises two countries located on the continent of Oceania: Australia and New Zealand. Both nations have strong Western influences due to their European ancestry, with a significant proportion of their populations being descendants of English settlers. The temperate climate of the region supports large-scale wheat production in both countries. Australia's Downs and New Zealand's Canterbury grasslands are renowned for their livestock farming. These nations export substantial quantities of wheat, wool, butter, meat, and powdered milk, primarily to markets such as the United Kingdom. Australia is also rich in natural resources, including coal and iron ore, with a significant portion of its iron ore being shipped to Japan. The standard of living in both Australia and New Zealand is notably high, with residents benefiting from strong education systems and a culture of entrepreneurship. Most of the population in both countries resides in urban areas.

Pacific islands: this sub-region includes the various island nations and territories scattered across the Pacific ocean

The Pacific Islands region comprises a diverse array of islands and archipelagos in the South Pacific, including Papua New Guinea, Timor, and New Caledonia, each with its own distinct cultural characteristics. The marine climate of the region significantly shapes the lifestyle of its inhabitants. The area is home to many of the world's most traditional societies, though their cultures have evolved differently due to the geographical isolation of each island. Across these cultures, there is a strong sense of community, cooperation in daily affairs, and a primitive form of social organization resembling a communal system. Many tribes rely on subsistence farming, fishing, and hunting livestock for their livelihoods; while more developed tribes engage in agricultural practices.²¹ The colonial presence of the United States and European powers has created employment opportunities for locals, particularly in industries such as sugarcane, pineapple, banana cultivation, and mineral extraction. In urban areas, many inhabitants have been influenced by Western ideas and languages. The Pacific Islands region can be divided into three major sub-regions:

- a) Polynesia: This sub-region includes islands such as Hawaii, Easter Island, Samoa, Tonga, and Tahiti.

- b) Micronesia: The islands in Micronesia include the Mariana Islands, the Carolinas, Guam, the Marshalls, and the Gilbert Islands.
- c) Melanesia: This sub-region encompasses islands like the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and New Caledonia.

India's position in greater Southeast

India's position in Greater Southeast Asia remains a subject of debate, primarily because India is not geographically located within the region. However, some experts, like Professor Tomohiko Taniguchi, argue that India's proximity to Southeast Asia- especially the Andaman Islands and several Northeastern states- places it within the broader Southeast Asian sphere. Regardless of the geographical dispute, India's interests are strongly linked to this region. A significant portion of India's maritime trade passes through Southeast Asia, and the region is expected to play a crucial role in meeting India's future energy needs.²² Economically, Asia is on the verge of becoming the global center of gravity, with the 21st century often referred to as the "Asian Century." India, as Asia's largest democracy, is increasingly recognized as a key player in this emerging global dynamic, gaining acceptance from countries around the world, including those in Europe. India's international reputation has grown, and it is poised to make a mark on the global economy by overcoming challenges to its development. This shift can be traced back to India's "Look East" policy, which has evolved into the "Act East" policy to strengthen connectivity with Southeast Asia. This region is vital for India in countering China's growing influence in South Asia. To this end, India is forging alliances with major regional powers, including the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.²³ India has also recognized the need to bolster its naval strength, understanding that a stronger military presence is crucial for maintaining influence in the region. As part of this, India has participated in joint military exercises with influential states like Japan and the United States, as well as several ASEAN nations. Currently, the Indian Navy is one of the most powerful in the Indian Ocean, and its presence is increasingly felt in the Pacific. India has taken an active stance on the South China Sea issue, advocating for a peaceful resolution that challenges China's territorial claims in the region. Despite China being one of India's major trading partners, India is engaged in a diplomatic effort to assert its position in the Asia-Pacific region. As the Indo-Pacific concept gains prominence over the Asia-Pacific model, India's role in regional politics has strengthened. In terms of naval power, India dominates the Indian Ocean, China is a force in the Western Pacific, and the United States maintains a global reach.²⁴

India's foreign policy towards greater southeast Asia

As India's trade ties with the Indo-Pacific region have grown, so has the need to secure its sea lines of communication, particularly in light of China's expanding economic and military presence in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.²⁵ This growing concern has led India's foreign policymakers to shift from the "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy." The core focus of the Act East Policy is on security- especially maritime security- connectivity, and regional integration.²⁶ At the heart of India's Indo-Pacific strategy, the Act East Policy emphasizes deepening engagement with Southeast Asia and recognizes ASEAN's centrality in the region. Beyond traditional security concerns, India is also addressing non-traditional and environmental maritime challenges. India is an active member of the Quad and has strengthened its cooperation with ASEAN, yet it has been clear that it

does not intend to use the Quad as a platform for anti-China actions.²⁷ For instance, during the 2021 Quad summit, discussions centered on issues such as vaccine distribution and combating environmental challenges, rather than confronting China directly. This approach has led to ASEAN countries not expressing significant concerns about India's participation in the Quad. Building connectivity in the region is crucial, as it fosters enhanced information-sharing and coordinated responses to potential threats. Such cooperation is vital for maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia, which in turn supports India in safeguarding its blue economy, trade routes, and energy security (India-ASEAN Digital Work Plan 2023). In 2020, the Quad members also discussed advancing secure digital connectivity (Office of the US Australia-India-Japan Consultations). The role of high-speed internet, particularly through 5G technology, is becoming increasingly important. This technology has sparked competition between China and the U.S., with China making significant progress; it is projected that by 2024, 5G services will cover half of China's mobile users. While Japan and South Korea are also advancing in this area, India and many Southeast Asian countries still lag behind in 5G adoptions. The role of the USA in the Indo-Pacific region is very important.²⁸

Conclusion

The term "Indo-Pacific" emphasizes India's role, with "Indo" referencing the Indian Ocean, but also reflecting India's strategic significance.²⁹ China has responded by asserting that the Indian Ocean does not belong to India, yet India must seize this moment to strengthen its influence in the Indo-Pacific. India's increasing involvement in the region is essential for countering the triangular alliance of China, Pakistan, and Russia. Although India has sometimes undermined its position on the global stage, this new opportunity in the Indo-Pacific must be capitalized on. Cooperation with QUAD partners- comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India- needs to be deepened, and India's relationship with ASEAN has reached new heights. Meanwhile, the region's ties with China remain relatively warm, and India must navigate this dynamic strategically. Beyond commercial interests, Southeast Asia is also recognized as a key source of natural resources, crucial for meeting India's growing energy demands. Strengthening commercial, cultural, and technological exchanges between India and the region is vital for India's long-term energy security and broader geopolitical goals. Therefore, India's active participation in the Indo-Pacific region is crucial for its strategic, economic, and energy needs. Dr. Mohor Chakraborty, in her article "*India's Expanding Outreach in the Indo-Pacific*", states that India's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, along with its ambition to be a "net security provider" and "first responder," has increased its responsibilities and extended its influence in the region. India views the Indo-Pacific as the eastern exit of the Indian Ocean.³⁰ According to India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, and the Indo-Pacific represents a natural progression beyond the "Act East" policy, reflecting a broader regional engagement that transcends the boundaries of South Asia. The Indian Maritime Security Strategy, released in October 2015, identifies the Indo-Pacific as one of six key maritime areas for India, encompassing the transition from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, passing through critical straits and seas such as the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Philippines Sea. This highlights India's intention to strengthen its ties with nations in this area as part of its Act East Policy. During the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that the Indo-Pacific is a natural region rich in both global opportunities and challenges. He clarified that India does not view the Indo-Pacific as a

strategic grouping or an exclusive club, nor does it seek to dominate the region. India, he noted, does not see the Indo-Pacific as directed against any particular country.^{31, 32}

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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