

General Studies - 2; Topic – Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests

Indo-Pacific balance at Shangri-La

1) Introduction

- The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) is an inter-governmental security forum held annually by an independent think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- The Shangri-La Dialogue has evolved into a key strategic gathering of the Asia-Pacific region.
- It is attended by defense ministers, permanent heads of ministries and military chiefs of Asia-Pacific states.
- Much more so than in 2017, the Indian Ocean loomed large over 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue.

2) Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Address

- The keynote address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi proved an important opportunity to highlight India's perspectives on regional security dynamics.
- The main message was his articulation of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region.
- The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic space is an outgrowth of China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region.
- It signifies the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the importance of the oceans to security and commerce.

3) Indo-Pacific Framework

- Indo-Pacific is a "natural region" ranging "from the shores of Africa to that of the America.
- Increasing use of the term Indo-Pacific recognises India's centrality to global influences.
- A "stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" is an "important pillar" of India's strategic partnership with the United States.
- The emphasis shown by the US on the 'Indo-Pacific' can be termed as its strategic initiative towards India.
- The Pentagon has already begun using the new term in the US official documents.
- The US military has renamed its Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command.
- This shows the rising significance of India in America's strategic calculations.
- ASEAN is one of the crucial building blocks of the Indo-Pacific.
- United States, India, Japan, and Australia — the "Quad" group — is emphasizing "Indo-Pacific" as a new strategic space.

4) India's Role

- Today India plays a key role in the Pacific, East Asia and Southeast Asia.
- 'Act East Policy' is aimed at substantial improvement of India's relations with Southeast Asia
- India is also trying to make innovative use of trade and diplomacy as its strategic arsenals.

5) Why Indo-Pacific region?

- Maintaining regional stability.
- Strong ties with the US are seen as a vital tool for enhancing India's strategic posture.
- For the long-term vision of national interest.

- China's increasingly active presence in the Indian Ocean region as well as its efforts to expand geopolitical reach in Asia and beyond by the use of trade and military.
- In the present time, the control of sea lanes and ports would be the game changer.
- China seems to have taken the lead with its geopolitical project—the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI).
- For adhering to freedom of navigation, adherence to rules-based order and stable trade environment.
- For free sea and air lanes, connectivity and upholding international rules and norms.

6) **Concerns / Challenges**

- China is keeping a close watch at India's engagement through strategic dialogues, military exercises and security agreements with many Indo-Pacific countries.
- China's military build-up in the South China Sea and its sweeping territorial claims across the strategic waterway.

7) **Way Forward**

- ASEAN must form the geographic core to any Indo-Pacific architecture.
- India must increase its strategic alignment with the US in order to balance the security concerns emanating from China's aggressive stance.
- Build-up of India's naval capabilities, if India has to emerge as one of the main players in the Indo-Pacific.
- Freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law will make our sea lanes the pathway to prosperity.

