Developments with the Indo-Pacific - New MEA Division

What is the issue?

- India recently set up an Indo-Pacific division in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).
- In this backdrop, here is an overview of the rationale and significance of the move as well as India's priorities and challenges in the region.

What constitutes the Indo-Pacific?

- The term Indo-Pacific has been gaining focus in Indian policy circles for some time now.
- This has now achieved an operational clarity with the Indian vision clarified by the PM at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018.
- Accordingly, for India, the geography of the Indo-Pacific stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to Oceania.
- In other words, it spans from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas, including in its fold the Pacific Island countries.

How has India's Indo-Pacific engagement been?

- India’s Act East policy remains the bedrock of the national Indo-Pacific vision.
- Evidently, the centrality of ASEAN is embedded in the Indian narrative of Act East.
- India has been an active participant in mechanisms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), in ASEAN-led frameworks, in BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor.
- India has also been convening the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, in which the navies of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) participate.
- It has boosted its engagements with Australia and New Zealand and has deepened its cooperation with the Republic of Korea.
- Through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, India is stepping up its interactions with the Pacific Island countries.
- Besides, India’s growing partnership with Africa is evident from the convening of mechanisms like the India-Africa Forum Summits.
- Also witnessed is India’s multi-layered engagement with China as well as strategic partnership with Russia.

- These underline its commitment to ensuring a stable, open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

What are India's key priorities in this regard?

- India views the Indo-Pacific as a geographic and strategic expanse, along with the 10 ASEAN countries connecting the two great oceans.
- Inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific.
- Security in the region must be maintained through dialogue, a common rules-based order, and freedom of navigation.
- Besides, unimpeded commerce and settlement of disputes in accordance with international law are also the priorities.
- More connectivity initiatives, with respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, good governance, transparency, and sustainability should be promoted.

What is the new rationale for the MEA division?

- The term Indo-Pacific has been gaining prevalence in recent days.
- Major regional actors such as the U.S., Japan and Australia are articulating their regional visions, by including 'Indo-Pacific' in their official policy statements.
- E.g. the renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
- The Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept was unveiled by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016.
- Australia released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017 that detailed Australia’s Indo-Pacific vision centred on security, openness and prosperity.
- Given these, it was becoming imperative for India to operationalise its Indo-Pacific policy.

What is the significance?

- The setting up of the Indo-Pacific wing is a natural corollary to the priorities and vision of India in the Indo-Pacific region.
- It gives strategic coherence to India’s Look East policy.
- The wing will integrate Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), ASEAN region and the Quad to the Indo-Pacific table.
- The integration of the IORA means that attention will continue to be focused on the Indian Ocean Region.
- This can be a result of the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean and Chinese diplomacy in the region. Click here to know more.

- Also, now, there is increasing visualising of the ASEAN region as a part of the wider Indo-Pacific.
- This shows an evolution in the region's thinking, opening new possibilities for India's engagement with the grouping.
- Given India's stakes in its immediate neighbourhood, the new wing facilitates a more focused and integrated approach.

What are the tasks ahead?

- There are still challenges for India, especially on integrating the Quad which got revived in 2017 with its larger Indo-Pacific approach.
- The new MEA division should also move beyond security and political issues and articulate a more comprehensive policy.
- Commerce and connectivity will have to be prioritised if India is to take advantage of a new opening for its regional engagement.
- It will be challenging to maintain a balance between the interests of all stakeholders, simultaneously with an emphasis on "inclusiveness."
- Importantly, there are differences between India's vision and the U.S.'s strategy for the Indo-Pacific.
- Alongside this lies China's and Russia's viewing of the Indo-Pacific with suspicion and the geopolitical tensions between China and U.S.
- The new division will have to effectively manage these, in giving shape to India's diplomatic priorities in the Indo-Pacific.

Source: The Hindu

Quick Fact

Shangri-La Dialogue

- The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) is an inter-governmental security forum.
- It is held annually by an independent think tank International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).
- It is attended by defence ministers, permanent heads of ministries and military chiefs of 28 Asia-Pacific states.

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