Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy

What is the issue?

\n\n

US administration is pushing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy as its major economic initiative.

\n\n

What is the aim?

\n\n

\n
- Many observers consider it as an initiative for gathering an anti-China alliance.
\n
- The impression of the FOIP being a US-led anti-China alliance was strengthened by the existing security groupings like the Quad involving US, Japan, Australia and India.
\n
- But the impression in itself could create exactly the same problems for it as the BRI is suffering from.
\n
- Several critics of the BRI have argued that availability of alternative sources of financing would have reduced the dependency of smaller countries on Chinese funds.
\n
- They further argue that a multi-country initiative such as the FOIP can make a difference.
\n

\n\n

Who will be the potential members?

\n\n

\n
- From the US perspective, members would include its military partners in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan and Australia, as well as a major strategic

partner like India, whom the US recognises as a defence partner.
\n
- India’s inclusion in the US FOIP is inevitable, given the US’ visualising of Indo-Pacific as a geography engulfing the Indian Ocean.
\n
- Japan, Australia and India are clearly the three most important strategic allies of the US in Asia.
\n
- Any US plan to counterbalance Chinese influence particularly the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) requires the active support of all the three countries.
\n

\n\n

What is the problem with BRI initiatives?

\n\n

\n
- Poor Chinese diplomacy and lack of substantive engagement with partner countries.
\n
- Opaque project financing terms
\n
- Demand og concession in strategic autonomy
\n
- Strong arming several small countries to unreasonable terms.
\n

\n\n

How far FOIP is similar to BRI?

\n\n

\n
- **Non-inclusiveness -** The FOIP could hardly avoid being identified as an anti-China military grouping.
\n
- An ‘inclusive’ FOIP is inherently counter-intuitive for a US administration that prefers handling economic relations bilaterally.
\n

\n\n

\n
- **Market Access -** US has announced strategic investments worth $113.5 million in the Indo-Pacific, with particular emphasis on expanding digital

connectivity, energy security and sustainable infrastructure.
\n
- Cooperative projects were announced such as the ‘Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier 1 Status’ to India for export of high-technology items by American firms and LNG agreement with Japan.
\n
- These steps indicate efforts by the US administration to secure greater market access for American businesses in key regional markets such as India and Japan.
\n
- Such market access in recipient countries is focused on areas that can provide American businesses control over production of strategic assets like energy.
\n
- This is exactly the same reason the Chinese investments in the BRI are criticised for.
\n

\n\n

\n
- **America First -** While advancing ‘Made in China’ is a core objective of the BRI, ‘America first’ appears to be a similar objective for the FOIP.
\n

\n\n

Can it materialise?

\n\n

\n
- India and Japan, notwithstanding their multiple issues with China, is not keen on committing to a distinct anti-China regional agenda.
\n
- Both of these countries need to keep working with China in their own economic and global interests.
\n
- India has emphatically asked for an ‘inclusive’ Indo-Pacific, while not committing to a US-Japan-Australia infrastructure partnership.
\n
- As an economic project, it needs to establish intentions of pursuing collective benefits for the region, as opposed to just those of American businesses.
\n
- Otherwise, it could well turn out to be an initiative that begins looking biased in much the same way as the BRI.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: Financial Express

\n

