The Significance of the Indo-Pacific for India

Why in news?

Strengthening engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, stronger partnerships can enhance India's reach and impact.

What are the recent developments in the Indo-Pacific region?

- India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is on rise with agreements like
  - An imminent early harvest trade deal with Australia
  - The sale of the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile systems to the Philippines
- India's Indo-Pacific strategy walks on two legs
  - **Strengthening national engagement with the region**- It elevates India's salience in the Indo-Pacific and raises Delhi's value for its partners
  - **Stronger partnerships with like-minded nations-** It helps to boost India's national capabilities, enhance its reach and impact.

How well does the India's approach fit into the US strategy?

- The US acknowledges that India is a
  - like-minded partner
  - leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean
  - active in and connected to Southeast Asia
  - a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora
  - an engine for regional growth and development
  - promoter of stability in South Asia
  - viable option to collaborate in new domains, such as health, space, and cyberspace
- The US is looking at partners and like-minded countries that have the strategic incentive, political agency, and material capability to contribute to regional security.
- The new Indo-Pacific Strategy document issued by the US recently admits that the US objectives of a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific cannot be accomplished by the US acting alone.
- It insists the requirement of an unprecedented cooperation with those who share in this vision and this is is complemented by an appreciation of India's capability in shaping strategic outcomes in the Indo-Pacific.
- Administrations in the US views that a strong India that can stabilise Asia and the Indo-Pacific serves American regional interests.
- Contrary to the Indian image of the Quad as a rigid alliance, the US strategy is to work in flexible groupings that pool collective strength.

What are the current challenges?

- Trade economists argue that bilateral pacts can't be a substitute for larger regional agreements.
- Delhi is also not on the same page as its partners like the US, EU, Japan, and Australia on the emerging digital trade issues.
- Although India has had active military diplomacy recently, it has been affected by the inability to export weapons to friendly nations because of inadequate domestic defence industrial base.
- India's capacity to lead the region depends on its national capabilities and plugging its major internal weaknesses especially in the domains of trade and security.
- Delhi's decision to walk away from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an Asia-wide free trade agreement and its new emphasis on Atmanirbhar Bharat (a self-reliant India) has generated widespread concerns about India's protectionist trends.

What lies ahead?

- But the Indian government argues that this is not a return to the past, but a new determination to strengthen domestic manufacturing capability.
- Delhi is now looking to liberalise trade relations with strategic partners like Australia.
- India has also intensified trade talks with the UAE, Israel and the UK.
- India and the EU too have taken a political decision to resume talks on a long-stalled FTA.
- There is great synergy between the US desire to empower allies and partners as they take on regional leadership roles themselves and India's ambition to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific.
- Simultaneous pursuit of stronger national capability and more active participation in coalitions are interconnected parts in realising that Indian ambition.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-significance-of-the-indo-pacific-for-india-7774066/

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