

# Regionalism as Complement of Globalization: Promoting interests and influences through Indo-Pacific Regional Construct

**Md Shafikul Haque**

Ph.D. Student, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India.  
Corresponding Author Email: shafitabu@gmail.com

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## Abstract

*The concepts of “Region” and its corresponding “Regionalism” became eminent by the end of Second World War and the onset of Cold War. The post-Cold War globalized world has transformed the “Regionalism” to suit increasing interdependence of nation-states, over and above increasing bilateral and multilateral institutional arrangements, through which nation-states intend to promote and assert their interests calculating on ‘relative gain’ rather than ‘absolute gain’ in the ensuing International Liberal Order. Regionalism ensures preservation and promotion of both national and regional interests internationally/globally, thereby serving as insurance to the pacing globalization. The emergence of Indo-Pacific encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in a geostrategic regional construct from that of Asia-Pacific can be studied from the very essence of this global transformation. It is also no denying that the theatre of Indo-Pacific attracts several great powers interests. The geostrategic stakes of India and China with their interests and claims over territorial waters in the Indian Ocean and South & East China Seas respectively, provide for an important sphere to study in the Indo-Pacific. At this backdrop, the paper tries to study regionalism vis-à-vis globalization, with specific reference to India’s geostrategic stakes, challenges and advantage in the Indo-Pacific.*

## Keywords

*Globalization, Indo-Pacific, Regionalism.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific, today, is driven by various regional concerns ranging from concerns of China’s assertive rise to the rising non-traditional threats to security.[1] Coupled with these concerns are the apprehensions on the US interests in the region in its strategy of rebalancing and increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific, besides the underpinning centrality of ASEAN in the regional order and the rise in maritime security concerns along the Indian Ocean Region. While it is pertinent for India to have a considerable footprint through its foreign policy framework in the Indo-Pacific to become an influential international player in the region, its relationship with Southeast Asia stands as a defining factor.[3] The centrality of ASEAN in implementing India’s Act East Policy (AEP) [15] towards the larger Indo-Pacific has been reaffirmed by the India-ASEAN Summit held in January 2018 in New Delhi.[2]

Southeast Asia has been credited for its fast economic development and prosperity, notwithstanding it being focal of conflicts during the cold war era. The fastness with which the region achieved its regional integration and growth, has during the post-cold war era endowed it as an ‘eye’ for the great-powers in international politics.[5] As Hwang K D [10] says “ASEAN attempted to revitalize the regional idea in such a way as to adapt itself to a new security environment of both geo-political and geo-economic shifts in the post-Cold War period”. [6] ASEAN being an important institution in the context of Indo-Pacific regionalism, India’s relationship with it will be a defining factor for India’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

India’s history of cordiality and interconnectedness with the Southeast Asian nations has to be harnessed for good and brought forward in advancing its Indo-Pacific regional interests.[4] Furthermore, the highly evolving geostrategic significance of the Indo-Pacific has allowed the actors competing as well as seeking responsibilities in the region to build partnership- economically and politically, besides promoting defence for encountering traditional and non-traditional security threats. India’s geo-strategic setting makes it an important actor, who is “expected to play a critical role in shaping the contours of the 21st century Indo-Pacific”. [7]

## REGIONALISM IN THE TIME OF GLOBALISATION: INDIA’S INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL STRATEGY

The onset of globalization and liberalization in the 1990s increasingly integrated societies and economies, rising as well interdependence between nations in the international system. Such a shift in global order led to numerous opportunities and challenges being thrown open into the international system.[11] To face with the rising international competition of the global economy and the new challenges and opportunities, a new era of regionalism (Harshe)[9] to serve common and mutual interests has emerged by the early 1990s. Along the time, regionalism has served as an effective tool in achieving the objectives of the increasingly liberalized, globalized and interdependent nations in the region. [12] The post-Cold War world order has resulted into a new wave of regionalism to serve individual countries”

national interests through a common platform in such a globalized and liberalized international system.

Joseph S. Nye (1968) defines regionalism as “the formation of inter-state associations or groupings on the basis of regions”. Though the definition lacks unanimous acceptance, regionalism in international politics pursues for overall development with a geographical region of similar goals and values. The concepts of “Region” and its corresponding “Regionalism” became eminent by the end of Second World War and the onset of Cold War. [8] The post-Cold War globalized world has transformed the “Regionalism” to suit increasing interdependence of nation-states, over and above increasing bilateral and multilateral institutional arrangements, through which nation-states intend to promote and assert their interests calculating on “relative gain” rather than “absolute gain” in the ensuing International Liberal Order. Regionalism ensures preservation and promotion of both national and regional interests internationally/globally, thereby serving as insurance to the pacing globalization.

To enhance and develop varying cooperation in different areas of mutual interests based on regionalism, several proximate countries have come together to consequently constitute themselves into regions.[13] The emergence of Indo-Pacific encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in a geostrategic regional construct from that of Asia-Pacific can be studied from the very essence of this global transformation. It is also no denying that the theatre of Indo-Pacific attracts several great powers interests. The geostrategic stakes of India and China with their interests and claims over territorial waters in the Indian Ocean and South & East China Seas respectively, provide for an important sphere to study in the Indo-Pacific.[12]

The regional order of the Indo-Pacific- both in terms of economic and security is being disrupted by the imbalance that the assertive rise of China’s dominance creates, which has been aggravated further by China’s powerful counter claims over South China Sea and East China Sea, along with its rapid military modernization and power projection in the West Pacific. Integration of China into the existing regional frameworks has offered the nation an increased role in maintaining the stability of the region. Besides, there has been an increasing socio-economic dependence of ASEAN on China, despite China’s increasingly suspected and riddled performance. Such interdependence between China and the ASEAN countries and also with other countries in the region and beyond has rendered the rhetorical containment policy by major powers in the region and beyond to have any significant practical impact. On the other hand, the US role as a powerful international player in the region has been undermined by its recent reduction in defence budget due to lack of resources, having given to itself the biggest challenge of adjusting to the rising China, thereby avoiding any open confrontation with China.[19]

At such a backdrop, other countries are readjusting to balance the rise and to serve respective national interests. It is

said that the visit to Japan by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013 is part of India’s policy of readjustment against the hegemonic rise of China in the region, for it is believed that India will be at an advantage by having a strengthened strategic cooperation with Japan (Zee News) [26]. So far, India’s relationship with ASEAN and the countries, such as Australia, Japan, ROK and the US have been elevated to that of Strategic Partnership, which will help in aiding India’s better presence in the Indo-Pacific.[18] With its legitimate interests in the region, India’s partnership will provide a strategic balance to maintain stability of the regional order in the Indo-Pacific.[14] Besides, by strengthening partnership with the countries in the region, it is pertinent for India to provide a leadership role in transforming peacefully the regional architecture and the security process concerning the region. It is therefore, believed that India requires to have a deeper and stronger economic and security relations with the countries in the Indo-Pacific, in particular, taking also the advantage of its leverage in ASEAN and some of the East Asian countries, so as for India to have its presence felt significantly in the region serving its national interests, and failing to ascertain so will have an adverse impact upon India’s international relations with the Indo-Pacific countries.

However, it is not to be taken for granted and thought that India’s desire to get involved in the region’s important institutions as well as the kind of the acceptance that the region, especially ASEAN, Japan and ROK, has given to India, come out of natural processes.[17] Indeed, these desire and acceptance incorporates fears and apprehensions of the countries in the region on the shifting regional balance of power and influence due to the assertive and hegemonic rise of PRC. Major diplomatic strategies and cooperation, alongside economic integration within the region and beyond revolve mostly around the possible regional instability which can be caused by the kind the assertiveness with which China has been rising in the region and beyond. It is believed that stronger collective efforts along with strengthened and more viable integration of the economies will help in maintaining the regional balance of power and stability, while also at the same allowing the region and the countries to have the desired economic and strategic regional and domestic autonomies.[16] For India, apart from maintaining its autonomy, a closer engagement with the region’s institutions would be in its favor, allowing the country to have common and collective platform through which its interests-economically and strategically can be taken forward. Acceptance by the members also aids India in successfully establishing issue-based informal bilateral and multilateral ad-hoc alliances with countries of common and shared interests to serve its national interests internationally.

Successful engagement through such informal alliances to advance its interests in the region and beyond, making it possible for its foreign policy diplomacy to enter into any formal alliances involving major powers in the region, thereby allowing India to maintain its autonomy and status as

a great Asian power with its history of grand civilization and NAM by not joining formally in alliances, such as the system of the US Hub and Spokes in Asia. This in turn makes India to successfully maintain its multi-faceted alignment strategy, without any formal alliance, to establish strategic and diplomatic relations with like-minded nations to advance its interests in such an emerging and continuously changing regional balance of power in Asia in general, and in the Indo-Pacific in particular. For the countries in East and Southeast Asia, especially ASEAN, Japan and ROK, acceptance and participation of India in the important regional frameworks, considering the potential of the sub-continent, will be a key to maintaining the regional balance, while also at the same time preserving their autonomy- economically and strategically vis-à-vis great powers from within and beyond the region. India's addition, presence and participation into the regional system are believed to wither and bring down the level of influences, which can be caused not only by the rise of assertive PRC, but also by the potential presence of the US and formal membership of its Hub and Spokes military system. India, as the reliable emerging and potential great power in Asia, having shared wariness and apprehensions on China's assertive rise, has been looked upon by the region as capable of preserving the stable regional order in the long run.[20]

For its engagement in the Indo-Pacific, India has the vital component in its relationship with ASEAN. The future of India-ASEAN relationship will have much of the say upon advancement in their proposed and already implemented economic integration and FTAs, which will also be directly impacted by the ongoing negotiations of RCEP. It will be immature to have a say on the profits and losses of India's membership in RCEP for the time being. [21] However, the progresses in India-ASEAN relationship, though seen, are not actually reaching to the actual potential as yet. As for instance, connectivity between the two sub-continent still remains to be very poor with slow progress in implementation of projects, such as India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, KMTT, etc.; poor interactions and implementation in the existing sub-regional groupings, such as BIMSTEC, MGC, etc.[22] Lack of proactive engagement in the LEP and the policy's failure to successfully incorporate the North East India in it provide for significant weakness in India's diplomacy with the "East". Apart from the need of addressing the same urgently, it is pertinent for India to have a better commitment and practicality in taking forward and making the relationship progressed to its potential through greater efforts and engagement with the region. It is believed that a successful and matured India-Southeast Asia relationship, hence achieved, would result into the fulfillment of centrality of Southeast Asia in India's foreign policy diplomacy with the larger Indo-Pacific through the AEP.

Given their current levels of economic development, geostrategic significance, and involvement in regional value chains and production networks, the AEP is expected to deepen relations and enhance strategic partnerships with the

countries in the Indo-Pacific. [23] The deepening is likely to be conditioned by individual country specific determinants, such as greater collaboration in skill development and urban infrastructure with Singapore; student and cultural exchanges and cyber security cooperation with Malaysia; and cultural, religious and commercial cooperation with Thailand.[24] Geostrategic characteristics would also condition India's engagement with Indonesia, which is one of the most significant actors in the Indian Ocean region- an area that is increasingly witnessing greater strategic competition between India and China. A defining characteristic of the AEP, however, might be the emphasis on security and defence, as well as greater cooperation on combating terrorism, which is expected to become a part of India's strategic engagement with all the major countries of Southeast Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific. [25]

### CONCLUSION

Although, much diplomatic headway have been undertaken through the regional strategy, developing several multilateral and bilateral frameworks and organizations for engagement over the time, besides exchanges of several high-level visits between the countries in question, much of the developments at the grounds and their expected benefits for India are yet to be seen. Nevertheless, many trade and security relations have been progressively grown to serve the interest of India through the strategy. More than ever before, through several recent exchanges and visits of leaders between countries in the Indo-Pacific with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, there have been signs of increasing bilateral relations with both major and minor economies in the Indo-Pacific. Besides, India has given itself as an important influential actor in international relations today, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, while also acknowledging the Modi government's simultaneous engagement of the "East" and the "West" positively.

The rising India's potential and global status in the international system, along with its huge size, population, military and economic prosperity, besides being located geo-strategically; have rendered the countries in Southeast Asia to have India going along in building peaceful and stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific in particular, while also taking into account of India's capability to counter-balance the hegemonic rise of China in the region. India is also attracted by ASEAN because of its stance on sovereignty and non-interference, which are along the lines of ASEAN principles as well. Therefore, India-ASEAN relations reflect upon the reality of contemporary global order of "complex interdependence" between nations, alongside the reality of national interests and balance of power in the twenty-first century international politics. The situation of interdependence is being used to serve each other's national interests in the international system. With its fast growing economic and political potential in the international system, and with proper and well-planned exploitation of its potentially unexploited economic potential, India is expected

to gain from its international relations with Southeast Asia, and further in advancing its Indo-Pacific regional strategy.

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