

With India's help, Asean could fulfil Indo-Pacific aspirations

New Delhi can act as multilateral connector,
bloc to benefit from balanced approach

By Yanitha Meena Louis



There are three approaches to the Indo-Pacific, according to Dr Gurpreet Khurana at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, categorised as "hard", "soft" and "antagonists". Gurpreet, credited with first using the term "Indo-Pacific" in a contemporary and strategic sense, opined that the United States, the United Kingdom, European Union and Australia have taken a "hard" stance on the Indo-Pacific, focusing on "exclusive" military security alliances like AUKUS and Nato.

India, Japan, South Korea and Asean, on the other hand, adopted a "soft" approach to the Indo-Pacific, which underscores inclusiveness and focuses on holistic security. The "antagonists" of the Indo-Pacific – China and Russia – have rejected such a concept and adopted the narrative that the Indo-Pacific is meant to exclude strategically and isolate certain actors in the region, against the backdrop of acute geopolitical rivalry and competition.

Gurpreet's arguments simply reaffirm the synergies that exist between Asean and India's approach to the Indo-Pacific.

However, in terms of implementation, focus and influence, India's value and visibility as an Indo-Pacific trendsetter is ahead of Asean's. There are two reasons for this – India's rapid and strategic embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept and conversely, Asean's sluggish acceptance of the concept in terms of nomenclature and strategic considerations.

Nonetheless, there has been some "progress" lately on the Indo-Pacific for both Asean and India. The Asean-Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF) was launched this year under Indonesia's chairmanship. Aimed at "transforming rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region into mutually beneficial cooperation", the forum prioritises three agendas – green infrastructure and resilient supply chains; sustainable and innovative financing for energy transition; and digital transformation and creative economy.

There are also enhanced efforts at "mainstreaming" and operationalising the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – signalling that the AOIP will function more than just a "guiding" document – making it fit for time and purpose.

Deft approach

For India on the Indo-Pacific multilateralism front, 2023 could not have been better. As G20 and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) chair, New Delhi's Global South agenda, and pragmatic,

balanced and assertive foreign policy choices took centre stage.

Being a leading proponent of Indo-Pacific cooperation and guided by core policies, such as Neighbourhood First Policy, Act East Policy, Africa Outreach and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), this past year demonstrated how New Delhi's role in the emerging Indo-Pacific order is taking new forms and gaining fresh momentum.

These recent developments and "successes" make the much-hyped synergies between India and Asean's approach to the Indo-Pacific, specifically IPOI and AOIP, that much more apparent and operable. Whether in terms of ideals and principles or objectives and priorities in the Indo-Pacific, it is undeniable that India is a natural partner for Asean that demands more attention.

What's missing is Asean failure to recognise that it is dealing with a different India – this is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to tapping on New Delhi for more meaningful means of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

What stands out for India as a significant partner for Asean in the Indo-Pacific is its ability to take a multi-aligned and multi-pronged approach to partnerships in the region, setting it apart from countries like Korea and Japan. New Delhi has gradually but intently refined its approach, reflecting an adept compartmentalisation of interests, strategic competition and geopolitical dynamics.

India can balance continued commitments to SCO and BRICS (which means constructive engagement with traditional "rivals" like China and Pakistan), collaboration within the Quad and I2U2 and finally, advancement of cornerstone mechanisms like the G20 and BIMSTEC.



What stands out for India as a significant partner for Asean in the Indo-Pacific is its ability to take a multi-aligned and multi-pronged approach to partnerships in the region.



A commitment to multilateralism and regionalism despite existing deep-seated rivalries makes India, by far, the most ‘centred’ Indo-Pacific partner – a reality that has not fully dawned upon Asean policymakers.

A commitment to multilateralism and regionalism despite existing deep-seated rivalries makes India, by far, the most “centred” Indo-Pacific partner – a reality that has not fully dawned upon Asean policymakers.

For example, just by virtue of India's membership in Quad, coupled with its new public goods agenda, the latter cannot simply be a China-containment strategy – a preconception that has long plagued and impeded Asean's ability to respond to and engage with the mechanism.

There is also the possibility and opportunity for Asean's enhanced cooperation with other partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Africa, Middle East and Pacific Islands, with India acting as a “broker” within existing frameworks and initiatives.

One of the key outcomes of the G20 summit in New Delhi was the African Union's inclusion as a permanent member. This can be seen as a culmination of New Delhi's accelerated re-engagement with Africa in recent years through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, India-Africa Forum Summit and Africa Outreach initiative.

Similarly, Asean should also attempt to leverage on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced during the G20 summit last year, seeing how connectivity remains a top priority for the bloc. IMEC is expected to stimulate development through enhanced connectivity and integration between Asia, the Gulf states and Europe.

With similar ongoing connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, which connects Southeast Asia and India by road, capitalising on an initiative like IMEC could be mutually beneficial. IMEC could be extended further east to link Asean member states to the Middle East.

Eye on Pacific

Asean could also forge stronger ties with the Pacific Islands – the supposedly side-lined part of the Indo-Pacific – facilitated by India. In May 2023, the third Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) was held in Papua New Guinea.

At the third FIPIC summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated that the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are “not small but large ocean countries” and announced new initiatives, including a 12-step action plan in line with PICs' needs and priorities.

Through FIPIC, India could be Asean's gateway to the Pacific and even encourage inter-regional collaboration to address shared challenges, such as climate change and disaster mitigation.

In the same vein, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)-Asean cooperation can also be bolstered, with India playing a bigger role in identifying opportunities and focus areas for more robust collaboration.

This is against the backdrop of how India was the lead member state that developed and finalised the IORA vision document on the Indo-Pacific, which was adopted in November 2022.

For many states in the region, including Asean member states, the rise of a “new” India has not been the easiest thing to which to calibrate or adapt. Recognising change and altering perceptions of New Delhi is a necessity but that's a challenge.

Asean's current relations with India are defined by older, outdated and “safer” narratives – none of which reflects current realities. This is a missed opportunity on several counts, India at its current geopolitical trajectory is and will remain to be an important partner. It is time Asean realises this, too.



Yanitha Meena Louis

Researcher at the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia