

RCEP and Indo-Pacific Region: Implications for India's Act East Policy

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The Indo-Pacific region's strategic importance lies in its role in global trade and energy supply. Strengthening multilateral institutions is crucial to maintain a balance of power amid China's growing assertiveness. Post the change in the US administration and the pandemic's impact on the world order, restoring multilateralism is emphasized. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) plays a vital role in this multilateral order for the Indo-Pacific. India's "Act East Policy" is an essential instrument for pursuing its interests in the region. However, India chose to opt out of RCEP, citing concerns about bias favoring China's interests. This paper explores India's significance in the Indo-Pacific and analyzes the implications of its decision on RCEP and the "Act-East Asia Policy." India's stance has broader implications for regional economic integration and its ability to balance China's influence while shaping the Indo-Pacific's evolving dynamics.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, RCEP, India, Act East Policy, Belt and Road Initiative, QUAD

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All the websites cited in this article were last visited on August 5, 2023.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region is a theatre of emerging alliances and has witnessed dynamic changes in the geo-political equations in recent times. The growing vigor in the Indo-Pacific is driven by the emergence of this region as the new focal point of global trade and energy supply triggering strategic competition amongst various actors. Balance of power needs to be maintained between assertive China and the US alliance system which is re-fuelled and recently shifted to this region after its exit from Afghanistan and West Asia. The Indo-Pacific region is witnessing a careful, practical and consensus-seeking approach to multilateral institution-building. As a response to the growing belligerence of China, the Indo-Pacific region has witnessed various multilateral groupings such as the revived Quadrilateral Security Framework (QUAD) by the US, Japan, Australia and India, AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) trilateral security pact, etc. Moving towards the alliances formed to achieve economic multilateralism, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) offers a certain major set of negotiations that would have crucial implications for the economic paradigm in the region.

RCEP has been ratified by the 10 ASEAN economies and its 5 FTA partners namely; China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. India, even after persistent negotiations since 2013, finally refused to join the pact, however. While India decided to opt out of the grouping, the agreement among the other fifteen members was signed in February 2020. RCEP promises to take economic multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region to new heights, while influencing other vital multilateral institutions. Given the amount of trade and population that RCEP is trying to integrate, it is only emerging to become more strengthened and significant. RCEP, often labelled as “China-led”¹ has other significant political architects, despite the presence of the region’s largest economies. If RCEP spurs mutually beneficial growth, its members, including China, will gain significantly USD 19 billion annually by 2030 across the world.² It is, arguably, the most important achievement of regional economic integration, investment liberalization and trade in East Asia of the past twenty years, taking multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region to new heights.

Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to examine how RCEP has evolved as a key economic multilateral institution in the Indo-Pacific region and how it

is influencing multilateralism in the region in general. Simultaneously, India's decision not to join the RCEP can have implications for its Act East Policy. The paper attempts to examine India's future political and economic stance towards regional integration. The author will try to answer the following questions in this paper: What the Indo-Pacific region holds for India and what are the elements of India's Indo-Pacific Approach? For this goal, this paper incorporates RCEP as an emerging multilateral forum in the region and analyzes how RCEP is influencing multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region. To take India's interests into consideration in the region, the Act East policy is discussed as a tool and key diplomatic initiative. As India has decided to stay out of RCEP, the last part discusses its implications over India's Act East policy in particular and its strategy in the Indo-Pacific region in general.

2. The Indo-Pacific Region: What Does It Hold for India?

For modern human history, the maritime domain has been the key to establishing emerging powers who are shaping regional dynamics and larger security structures.³ In particular, the Indian Ocean is a ground for India's geo-political stance. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new space is thus the new strategic reality of the twenty-first century for India. The Indo-Pacific region is a contested concept. For India, "the region stretches from the eastern coast of Africa including the trade chokepoints of the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb to the Pacific Ocean i.e. western coast of North and South America."⁴ Any instability in this region would cause an adverse impact on the political and economic security of India. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said: "More than 50 per cent of India's trade goes towards the East, towards the Pacific Ocean. The line between the Indian and the Pacific oceans only exists on a map."⁵

India launched its Look East policy in 1991 under Prime Minister Narsimha Rao, "when Indian leaders decided to re-evaluate both their economic policy and foreign policy by renewing their ties with Southeast Asian neighbors."⁶ This vision was revamped under Prime Minister Modi when the action-oriented Act East Policy was rolled out in 2014. This initiative involved persistent engagements with the countries

of Southeast Asia in different domains of trade, connectivity, cultural exchange, defence pacts at various levels such as bilateral, regional and multilateral. The policy also catered to the development, connectivity and exchanges of Northeast India to Southeast Asia. The Act East Policy, quite evidently, proved to be the launchpad for India in its vision for Asia-Pacific trade and connectivity. However, its core features eventually meet with the larger set of goals that India envisions in its Indo-Pacific policy, i.e., “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific.”⁷

The Indo-Pacific region is witnessing a great deal of evolution in the multilateral frameworks. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific littoral as a hub of global trade and commerce, its capacity to provide huge markets and vitality in global supply chains and its geostrategic location have made the region a contested platform for major powers’ geopolitical and geoeconomic concern. In this sense, it is transforming the traditional imaginations and arrangements.⁸

Along with India’s increased vigor for tackling the challenges and tapping opportunities in the maritime space, China is another key actor whose emergence leads India to reassess its foreign policy. The Chinese have, to a great extent, caused a shift in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Considering ASEAN’s middle power diplomacy in dealing with major powers, the QUAD, RCEP and AUKUS alliance are shaping the dynamics of geopolitics in the region.⁹

India’s vision of integrated security and shared economic coordination across the Indian and the Pacific oceans is an interesting topic for careful study of multilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific region. India places partnerships at the core of its Indo-Pacific interests.¹⁰ Through its participation in multilateral groupings such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Initiative (BIMSTEC), etc., India envisions “Security and Growth for All.”¹¹

The “ASEAN-Centrality” is also a key aspect of India’s notion of the Indo-Pacific region. Commemorating the 30th anniversary of the India-ASEAN dialogue at the 19th ASEAN-India summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the Indian Vice President reaffirmed the importance of ASEAN to the region.¹² In this regard, India’s option out of RCEP could be understood based on India’s Act East Policy towards RCEP.

3. Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

RCEP should not be viewed simply as a trade agreement, but as an economic cooperation pact that strengthens regional political security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.¹³ The agreement involves the largest population in the trading scale of the world, with the greatest potential among all transnational trade deals. The growing hyper-nationalist political leadership in the countries accommodating vast economies has led to the rise of a great power economic bilateralism replacing multilateralism and thereby introducing new protectionist policies resulting in trends of reversing economic globalization. In the Indo-Pacific as well, the prospects of economic multilateralism stood diminished by the de facto moribund state of global multilateral trade negotiation sponsored by the WTO.¹⁴ Beyond its implications for trade and deepening of economic ties between member nations, RCEP represents a major resurgence of economic multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region, in particular abridging the economic case for the region.¹⁵

In November 2020, 15 countries- members of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and five regional partners- signed the RCEP, arguably the largest free trade agreement in history. RCEP will connect about 30 per cent of the world's people and output and, in the right political context, will generate significant gains¹⁶. It could add USD 209 billion annually to world incomes, and USD 500 billion to world trade by 2030.¹⁷

RCEP was launched on the margins of the 2012 East Asia Summit.¹⁸ It emerged from a series of earlier proposals for a region-wide FTA and, along with the then TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), was positioned as a 'pathway' to APEC's longer term goal of creating the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific.¹⁹ APEC currently consists of 21 members including the US, Mexico, New Zealand, Chile, Peru, Russia apart from the East Asian economies.²⁰ Such geographical expansiveness impedes smooth functioning as even roadblock to attain optimum leverage of the institution, given the changing realities of the US-China trade war and inconsistencies in Russia-US dynamics. Although APEC actually operates on "the basis of non-binding commitments, open dialogue and equal respect for views of all participating economies,"²¹ it does not have a binding treaty. On the other hand, RCEP provides a more realizable and realistic economic platform to its FTA partners pondering specifically on the Indo-Pacific region. This aspect, while giving more weightage to

RCEP as a viable economic platform, has made a dent in APEC.

Geopolitically, RCEP offers an ASEAN-focused rather than APEC-based approach to trade multilateralism and formally endorses the principle of “ASEAN Centrality.”²² In economic terms, however, ASEAN is a comparatively small party, accounting for only 11 percent of RCEP’s combined GDP, whereas China (47 per cent) and Japan (21 per cent) are the economic heavyweights of the bloc.²³ While India currently holds a modest share of 9 per cent, its high-speed growth trajectory promises to make it a core player in the future.²⁴ RCEP is often labeled accurately as “China-led,” but a triumph of ASEAN’s middle-power diplomacy.²⁵ The importance of such a large trade agreement covering East Asia is very much acknowledged. However, the credit for knitting such a vital agreement goes not to the economic heavyweights of the region such as Japan or China but ASEAN. Without the ASEAN Centrality, RCEP was a tough nut to crack.

Meanwhile, the maiden Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is experiencing its moment in Asian geopolitics. The QUAD is no longer a loose coalition. Its new approach is dissimilar from that during the Trump era. The former approach of a tough line on China is now indispensable, but without the name-calling of Beijing. With increasing China’s adventurism, the platform of an integrated market that it has got with a concrete formulation of RCEP has given an edge to China’s economy and its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. To tackle this, a more sophisticated approach is being invented, with enhanced emphasis by the US on carrying its allies and strategic partners together.²⁶ It would be interesting to see how RCEP and the QUAD members, who have stakes in both platforms i.e. Australia and Japan will maintain equilibrium with both platforms. The matter of decoupling trade from the issues of security and sovereignty is of big concern, especially when the signatories such as Japan and Australia have very deep economic ties with China.

With the new agreements, the economies will be more involved, more organized and systematic, linking their strengths in technology, manufacturing, agriculture and natural resources, incentivising the supply chain in the region and catering to political sensitivities. The agreement, however, does not specifically add anything with regard to labor, environment, or state-owned enterprises.

4. India's Apprehensions about Joining RCEP

India took a decisive step away from the mega-trade deal with PM Modi stating in his speech in Bangkok "... the present form of the RCEP Agreement does not fully reflect the basic spirit and the agreed guiding principles of RCEP."²⁷ It does not satisfactorily address India's outstanding issues and concerns, thereby making the agreement difficult to join for India.

Among the key concerns that India has, notable is the 'inadequate' protection against surges in imports. The Indian industry has raised concerns that cheaper products from China would "flood" the market. India is looking for an auto-trigger mechanism that would allow it to raise tariffs on products in instances where imports cross a certain threshold. India has not received any credible assurance either on its demand for more access, and its concerns over non-tariff barriers.²⁸ To India, which has a "USD 54 billion trade deficit with China,"²⁹ RCEP further promoting free trade with member countries would represent a blow to its economy. A deal could have impeded India's efforts to promote its manufacturing industry.³⁰

It is on a "possible circumvention" of rules of origin, i.e., the criteria used to determine the national source of a product were not addressed. Current provisions in the deal reportedly do not prevent countries from routing, through other countries, products on which India would maintain higher tariffs. This is anticipated to allow countries like China to pump in more products.³¹ During the negotiations, India sought to safeguard the interests of its domestic industry through measures like seeing a 2014 base year for tariff reductions instead of 2013, when negotiations on RCEP began, as it raised import duties on several products between 2014 and 2019. Using a base year before 2014 would mean a drastic drop in the import duties on these products.³² Also, some domestic sectors may take a hit due to cheaper alternatives from other participants in the pact. For instance, the dairy industry was expected to face stiff competition from Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, the steel and textiles sector also demanded protection.

But there are implications of not joining RCEP. The incongruity of not joining RCEP is greater for India, as it wants all three things differently: (1) the dependence on foreign capital; (2) an exaggerated sense of India's power; and (3) yet a recoiling from trade openness. But the third one cannot be achieved without affecting the first two.³³

The economic gains from those Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) did not turn out to be as great as India hoped. India is at the top of the countries that are signing FTAs with partner countries in order to gain preferential market access for its goods and services. But the purpose of these agreements is only partially being met. While exports have stagnated, India's imports from these countries and regions have increased sharply. Though consumers have benefitted from the FTAs, the Indian manufacturing sector has not been able to take advantage. India has signed large-scale bilateral deals encompassing all sectors with Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and the ASEAN countries.³⁴ According to the critics, this has led to huge trade distortions and what we call the "Noodle Bowl" problem, which is the result of the proliferation of bilateral FTAs. Each contains its own rules for tariff reduction, non-tariff trade reduction policy reforms and standards for administrative procedures. The "Noodle Bowl" is widely considered to be inappropriate for the trade.³⁵

The issue lies with India's uncompetitive manufacturing sector, which has constrained India to fetch advantages from these FTAs as compared to its trading partners. According to Biswajit Dhar, former director general of Research and Information System for Developing Countries,

[t]he Indian manufacturing sector has failed to raise its level of efficiency in order to compete in the market of its partner countries. Based on RCEP negotiation experience, a realistic yet meaningful FTA strategy has to be formulated. Mobilizing stakeholder support for signing more FTAs will be difficult if India cannot get the existing FTAs to work better.³⁶

While there is considerable opposition to RCEP from agriculture and industry, the Indian service sector tunes to a slightly different rhythm. According to the WTO data, "India was the world's eighth largest service exporter and ninth-largest service trader in 2018 and is a powerhouse in the areas of information technology and business services."³⁷ The IT firms have lobbied for greater access to the RCEP member country markets. The nature of IT exports in India involves the cross-border movement of professionals. As a consequence, IT firms have sought concessions relating to restrictive business visa rules, statutory compliance costs and domestic tax regimes, particularly in China. While RCEP has promised some service sector liberalization, it has not offered concessions on such cross-border movement of professionals which is a key interest area for India.³⁸

5. Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific

During the early 1990s, it was imperative for the government of India to take measures to promote economic growth and pull India out of the difficult situation. At that time, the country was facing an uncertain future due to the drastic change of global politics such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the sharp fall in the country's foreign exchange reserves, etc.³⁹ It became crucial for India to liberalize its economy and find its place in the globalizing world economy. This strategic outlook brought dynamism to India's foreign policy. One admirable step in this direction was the "Look East" Policy, launched in 1992 under the Narasimha Rao government.⁴⁰ Bilateral Trade between India and ASEAN grew from USD 3 billion in the early 1990s to USD 12 billion in 2003 and USD 79.3 billion by 2012.⁴¹ The trade value between India and ASEAN region amounted to over USD 842 million in the fiscal year 2019. India-ASEAN bilateral trade may double by 2025 to USD 300 billion.⁴² With the introduction of the Act East Policy, India's multi-dimensional ties with ASEAN have been given greater vigor and dynamism. This becomes further important in the backdrop of swiftly changing geopolitical dimensions, defined by the breath-taking rise of China.

ASEAN's centrality remains the tarrying concurrent characteristic of the Indo-Pacific at the regional level. India has placed the "Indo-Pacific" at the heart of its engagement with the countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia. In 2018, in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the Indian Prime Minister Modi, espoused a "free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region."⁴³ He further called for common commitment, based on shared values and principles, to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴ The whole approach of strengthening multilateral institutions in order to establish rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region has gained momentum and the Act East Policy of India is thus considered a major tool in order to achieve and sustain its interests in the region.⁴⁵

India's Act East policy supports connectivity programmes, strengthens integration and thus promotes regional cooperation. The present Act East policy lays huge emphasis on the connectivity programmes that link India's Northeast region with the ASEAN countries. The Act East policy has a strong synergy with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific and South Korea's New Southern Policy.⁴⁶ All three acknowledge the centrality of the ASEAN region and provide a great opportunity

for mutual cooperation.⁴⁷

The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” aims to develop a shared understanding of the free-flowing of common interests within a rules-based international system in the region.⁴⁸ In this context, the multilateral frameworks would play an important role in further promoting the idea of shared interests and bringing together a deep institutional framework to further propagate the Indo-Pacific discourse. But for such an alignment the states need to have a common belief, a common security platform, and a shared nature of collective working dynamics.⁴⁹

The Act East policy is a more developed and extended form of the Look East policy to assume greater salience of the strategic factors. It was intended as an economic strategy to promote trade and investment between India and the Southeast Asian region. When it comes to enhancing multilateralism in the economic sphere in the region, there is yet to emerge a critical mass of trade or investment ties linking South Asia to economies in the Pacific Rim.⁵⁰ India is yet to become well-integrated to economic institutions in the region. While India is a member of the East Asia Summit, the premier regional forum for strategic dialogue, it is not involved in the economically-focused APEC. RCEP promises to change this and mark a return to trade multilateralism-albeit at the regional rather than global level.⁵¹

6. Impact of RCEP on India’s Act East Policy

Look East policy, the predecessor of the Act East policy, was put in place primarily to achieve economic gains by extending arms of trade and investment in the ASEAN member countries in addition to strategic cooperation. Besides the upside to domestic consumers in the form of cheaper and high-quality products, RCEP provides specific advantage for Indian firms to participate in global value chains and attract foreign investment. The Act East policy cannot be seen narrowly as a diplomatic instrument extended towards achieving strengthened economic and cultural relations with ASEAN countries only. Moreover, being a signatory would have given India the opportunity to shape the agreement in the future, because staying out of the deal isolates India, limiting its ability to shape the emerging trade architecture.⁵²

Meanwhile, the ASEAN centrality undoubtedly has geopolitical significance as

the core of the Indo-Pacific, RCEP and thus the Act East policy. Considering the gap in economic capacities of India and China, and China's belligerent behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, however, it would be tough to anticipate how India would tackle the challenges and build the rules-based and integrated Indo-Pacific order while choosing protectionism under the waves of economic multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.

When India gave up its quantitative restrictions on imports after it lost the *India-Quantitative Restrictions* case before in the WTO,⁵³ there were apprehensions that the country would be flooded with imports. However, such liberalization helped India restructure its industry. It is difficult to mobilize public and political support for fundamental reforms, but global trend is a considerable template to follow. Joining RCEP would have given more substance to India's Act East Policy, the economic pillar of which has remained weak compared to those pertaining to political ties, strategic and security aspects, and people-to-people relations. Currently, there is an urgent need for greater exertion on strengthening connectivity, trade and investment bilaterally. Otherwise, the Indo-Pacific will lose attraction for India.⁵⁴

7. Conclusion

While discussing the geopolitical and geo-economic shift from Europe/America to Asia-Pacific, the concept of "Indo-Pacific" has assumed a new rallying point for major stakeholders like India. No one could deny such strategic concept like "Indo-Pacific" easily. There are immense geopolitical and economic possibilities for India in this region. In spite of its stance to a free, open, inclusive rules-based Indo-Pacific region, India adopted isolation from such a grand wave of multilateralism. A mega trade agreement is being formulated to promote global value chains and economic multilateralism. India should come back to negotiation for this trade deal because the RCEP membership will substantiate the goals of the Act East Policy more effectively. It is undoubtedly difficult for India to develop without a platform that RCEP provides against economic multilateralism.

Received: Mar. 15, 2023

Modified: May 15, 2023

Accepted: July 15, 2023

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