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**Topic: GS2 - IR - Indo-Pacific
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Reclaiming the Indo-Pacific narrative

Context:-

- Recently the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) articulated a collective vision for the Indo-Pacific region in a document titled **“The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”**.

Why Indo-Pacific Narrative by ASEAN Tiger:-

- **To Claim Stake in New Emerging Regional Order:** At a time when the **geopolitical contestation** between China and the United States is escalating, it has become imperative for the ASEAN **to reclaim the strategic narrative** in its favour in order to underscore its centrality in the emerging regional order.
- **Other Major Regional Players Narrative for Indo-Pacific:**
 - The release of the **U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy report** in June — it focusses on preserving a **“free and open Indo-Pacific”** in the face of a more **“assertive China”** — was perhaps the final push that was needed to bring the ASEAN discussion on the subject to a close.
 - **Japan** had already unveiled its **Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept** in 2016,
 - **Australia** released its **Foreign Policy White Paper** in 2017, detailing *its Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity.*

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated **India's Indo-Pacific vision** at the **Shangri-la Dialogue** in 2018, with India even setting up an **Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** earlier this year.
- **To Not aligning with Other Power's Lead:** For a long time, the ASEAN has been reluctant to frontally engage with the Indo-Pacific discourse as the perception was that it may antagonise China. But there was soon a realisation that such an approach might allow others to shape the **regional architecture** and marginalise the ASEAN itself. And so the final outlook that the ASEAN has come up with effectively seeks to take its own position rather than following any one power's lead.

ASEAN's Narrative as per 'The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' Document:-

- It underlines in the document the need for **an inclusive and "rules-based framework"** to "help to generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region".
- An awareness of the emergence of a great power contest around its vicinity pervades the document as it argues that "*the rise of material powers, i.e. economic and military, requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game*".
- While the ASEAN outlook *does not see the Indo-Pacific as one continuous territorial space*, it *emphasises development and connectivity*, underlining the need for **maritime cooperation, infrastructure connectivity** and **broader economic cooperation**.

Imperative of ASEAN Narrative of Indo-Pacific:-

- Despite individual differences and bilateral engagements ASEAN member states have with the U.S. and China, the regional grouping can now claim to have a common approach as far as the Indo-Pacific region is concerned and which the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayuth Chan-ocha, suggested “should also complement existing frameworks of cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels and generate tangible and concrete deliverables for the benefit of the region’s peoples”.
- The ASEAN is signalling that it would seek to avoid making the region a platform for major power competition. Instead its frame of reference is economic cooperation and dialogue.
- The fact that the ASEAN has gone ahead and articulated an Indo-Pacific outlook is in itself *a seeming challenge to China which refuses to validate the concept. But the ASEAN’s approach is aimed at placating China by not allowing itself to align with the U.S.’s vision for the region completely.*

India’s View on Indo-Pacific and Response to ASEAN’s Narrative:-

- India has welcomed the ASEAN’s outlook on the Indo-Pacific as it sees “**important elements of convergence**” with its own approach towards the region.
- During U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s visit to India in June, India was categorical that it is “**for something**” in the Indo-Pacific and “**not against somebody**”, seeking *to carefully calibrate its relations with the U.S. and China in this geopolitically critical region.*

- As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has suggested “[and] that something is peace, security, stability, prosperity and rules”.
- India continues to invest in the Indo-Pacific; on the sidelines of the recent G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, Mr. Modi held discussions on the Indo-Pacific region with U.S. President Donald Trump and Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a focus on improving regional connectivity and infrastructure development.

Conclusion:-

- With the ASEAN finally coming to terms with its own role in the Indo-Pacific, the ball is now in the court of other regional stakeholders to work with the regional grouping to shape **a balance of power** in the region which favours inclusivity, stability and economic prosperity.