

# Regional Organizations in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific

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## Introduction

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geographic space by merging the Indian and the Pacific Oceans represents the new strategic reality of the twenty-first century. Being one of the world's most dynamic and diverse regions comprising multiple developing countries is becoming increasingly coherent as a single strategic construct. It has gained currency only in the last few years due to the shift in the geopolitical centre of gravity to this region (Siddiqui, 2019). This change in the status quo is evident from the increasing advent of security and economic and cultural organizations in the region. This article shall explore the spirit of regionalism through the lens of organizations fostering cooperation among their member states on various grounds.

## Evolution of Regional Organisations: Three Phases

The organizations in East Asia and Indo-Pacific centred their interests and agenda during three main phases, namely the ‘Cold War’ phase, the ‘Post-Cold war’ phase and the current phase, the ‘Countering China’ phase.

### *The Cold War Phase*

During the first segment of the Cold War phase that lasted until 1990, the regional organizations that existed merely acted upon alliances and treaties, like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The former was a military alliance under the leadership of the USA to counter Communism and USSR. At the same time, the latter was a series of bilateral defence relationships to protect the signatory countries if under threat (ASEAN, 2017). Another similar institution in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States Security Treaty, whose purpose was to protect and defend. During this phase, the alliances were highly influenced by the western powers and only the western allies or strong nations were included. In contrast, the small island nations and other weak ones were ignored. This omission was because most of the nations in the region were post-colonial states and perceived to be insignificant (AMRO, 2020).

### *Post-Cold War Phase*

With the end of the cold war and the impact of liberal hegemony, resulting in globalization and the complex interdependence forged between nation-states, the region was perceived to be more than just a colony or a sea route.

Its newfound status as a strategically important region consisting of significant trade routes, numerous Exclusive Economic Zones, vast untapped natural resources, mines, and a high-potential blue economy saw many new regional organizations more inclusive than their antecedents (ARF, 2004). These organizations included the small island nations that were earlier excluded and intended to improve the economy, culture, and financial stability while cooperating on maintaining peace and the overall development of the region. Remember that this phase was defined by the boom of several organizations, resulting in multiple transnational organizations' ventures that targeted collective growth (ARF, 2010).

Some of the organizations of this phase are the Executives' Meeting of East Asia-Pacific Central Banks, Greater Mekong Sub-regional Economic Cooperation, Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, ARF, BIMP-EAGA (Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia- Malaysia Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area), ADB, BIMSTEC, IORA, Chiang Mai Initiative, Mekong Ganga Cooperation, Network of Asian River Basin Organizations, Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy, East Asia Summit, CEPEA, ADMM+, Coral Triangle Initiative etc. (APEC, 2017).

### *Countering China Phase*

The current phase is the Countering China phase. The focus remains on economic, cultural and security regionalism, along with the motive to contain China's growth in the region across the domains mentioned earlier. This is because the 'Belt and Road Initiative and the 'String of Pearls' have been perceived as significant threats by other strong powers in the international system. Thus, the countries with Anti-China sentiments, such as the USA and other strategic players in the region like Japan, Australia and India, who aim to be the maritime security provider in the region, have been collaborating and forming organizations to control China's growth and outreach in the region (MEA, 2012). The most recent alliances in the region that have been formed for this purpose are the AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of India, Australia, India, Japan and the US (QUAD), which are all aimed at Countering China's influence and dominion in the East Asian and Indo Pacific region (ADB, 2012).

However, an important question remains to be answered by the western powers on whether the United States and the other strategic players of the region can collaborate with China To manage the region's hegemonic responsibilities, leading to a fourth phase that focuses on their joint initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

We have listed the broader and narrow interests of the regional organizations, whose functions reflect the trends set by the western powers, whether it be a selective engagement or a broader integration of powers. However, this distinction of organizations is not airtight, as the difference between the phases could be more explicit, and multiple organizations exist that do not satisfy the above-given analysis (Consilium, 2016).

Some exceptions to the first phase are ASEAN, APEC, The Pacific community, Pacific Economic Cooperation Council which were not military alliances but economic cooperations.

While the second phase does not consist of any exceptions as most of the countries were focusing on self-development and growth through trade and cooperation, the third phase, however, has exceptions like ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office, Credit Guarantee and Investment Forum, Trans-Pacific Partnership, Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership etc. which were not organizations formed to counter China but to focus on the regional security and development (APEC, 2018).

It is also to be noted that the organizations of the region can be analyzed and differentiated from an alternate perspective, i.e. based on the 'Nature of the Organisations'. This is because regardless of the main objectives set by the western hegemon, such as Containing Soviet Expansion, Transnational Trade stemming from Liberalization and currently Countering Chinese Growth, specific sectors demand constant attention, preservation and enhancement, such as the Economy, Defence, Disaster Management, Culture, Migration, Technology and Innovation (Youthpolicy, 2021).

Therefore, it can be determined that regional organizations work according to the evolving vested interests of western hegemon, the predominant sectors of the region depending on natural resource allocation as well as on the societal buttresses that govern the necessities of all nations in the world alike.

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## About the Author

Rose Paul is a very enthusiastic and observant learner. She is pursuing her Master's in International Studies at Stella Maris College and is greatly interested in the Indo-Pacific region. She hopes to join the Indian Government and contribute to policymaking, public administration and research. Rose wrote this perspective as part of her summer internship programme.

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