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Above the Line: The Indo-Pacific Needs Economics, Not Only Warships

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THE LIFT LINE

A maritime order is not held together by fleets alone but by the flow of goods, capital and infrastructure that give smaller states a stake in keeping it open, so an Indo-Pacific strategy that speaks only the language of security is speaking only half a sentence.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Indo-Pacific has become the organising idea of India's external strategy, yet the debate around it is often reduced to naval deployments, freedom-of-navigation patrols and [deterrence](https://ujjyari.com/terms/deterrence/) (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/deterrence/>). Security matters, but a strategy that neglects the economic pillar, trade agreements, connectivity corridors and development partnerships, cannot deliver a free, open and inclusive region. Smaller states in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean will not choose a partner on warships alone; they respond to markets, investment, ports, digital links and capacity-building. For an aspirant, this theme threads together India's flagship frameworks, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, SAGAR and its wider MAHASAGAR vision, ASEAN centrality and connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, and shows how they combine hard and soft power into a single design.

GS Paper 2: [Bilateral](https://ujjyari.com/vocab/bilateral/) (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; India and its neighbourhood; effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

For **Prelims**, hold the frameworks: the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative announced by India in 2019 at the East Asia Summit with its seven pillars; SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region, and its evolution into the MAHASAGAR vision; ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific; the Quad and its economic and technology pillars alongside security; and connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-

Thailand trilateral highway and the Kaladan multi-modal transit project. For **Mains**, argue that connectivity and trade are strategic instruments, not merely commercial ones, and that development diplomacy is how a rising power earns durable influence.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's Indo-Pacific vision was framed early around inclusion rather than containment. The Prime Minister's 2018 Shangri-La articulation stressed a free, open and inclusive region, ASEAN centrality and a rules-based order, not a bloc aimed at any single country. That inclusive framing is a strength, but it only works if backed by tangible economic delivery. A region cannot be kept open by declarations; it is kept open by the density of stakes that partners build in it.

Here India faces a competitive reality. Other powers have moved fast on ports, corridors and lending across the same waters, offering infrastructure at scale. India's comparative advantages, its market, its diaspora (<http://ujjayari.com/vocab/diaspora/>), its digital public infrastructure, its record as a first responder in humanitarian and disaster relief, are real, but they translate into influence only when they are organised into a coherent economic offer. The gap between vision and delivery, especially on connectivity projects that have long suffered delays, is the central weakness a security-first framing tends to hide.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Security is necessary but not sufficient

Maritime security, from anti-piracy patrols to domain awareness, protects the sea lanes on which trade depends. But protection is a floor, not a strategy. Partners want to know what flows through those secure lanes and who benefits, which is an economic question.

Connectivity and trade as strategic tools

A completed trilateral highway, a functioning transit corridor, a trade agreement that opens markets, a port that handles a neighbour's cargo, each of these creates a constituency for the order India wants. Economic integration is how influence is made durable rather than episodic.

PILLAR	INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT DELIVERS
Maritime security	Patrols, HADR, domain awareness	Safe, open sea lanes
Connectivity	Trilateral highway, Kaladan project, IMT links	Physical integration with the region
Development diplomacy	Lines of credit, capacity-building, digital links	Durable stakes for partner states
Institutional	IPOI, ASEAN centrality, Quad economic pillar	A rules-based, inclusive framework

ASEAN centrality and the economic test

ASEAN sits at the geographic and diplomatic heart of the Indo-Pacific, and its own outlook stresses development and connectivity over rivalry. India's credibility with ASEAN will be judged on whether it delivers markets and infrastructure, not on the frequency of its naval visits.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the Indo-Pacific as a contest of stakes, not only of ships. Influence in a maritime region accrues to the power that gives others the most to lose from disruption, and stakes are built through trade, investment and connectivity as much as through security guarantees. The transferable frame for GS2 is the integration of hard and soft power: security secures the space, economics fills it, and the two are complementary rather than alternative. The examiner rewards the candidate who resists the reflex to equate Indo-Pacific strategy with the navy, and who instead shows how IPOI, SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, ASEAN centrality and connectivity corridors form a single architecture in which development diplomacy is the load-bearing pillar.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific as the goal -> security pillar (patrols, HADR, domain awareness) keeps sea lanes safe but is only a floor -> economic pillar (trade agreements, trilateral highway, Kaladan, digital links, lines of credit) builds durable stakes for partners -> ASEAN centrality + IPOI + SAGAR/MAHASAGAR + Quad economic pillar bind them into one architecture -> partners gain reasons to keep the order open -> influence becomes durable, not episodic

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Finish the connectivity backlog.** Prioritise completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, the Kaladan transit project and allied links, because unfinished corridors are the single biggest gap between India's vision and its delivery.
- ② **Deepen trade integration.** Pursue and upgrade trade agreements across the region so that market access, not just security cooperation, anchors partnerships, while protecting sensitive domestic sectors.
- ③ **Scale development diplomacy.** Expand lines of credit, capacity-building and the export of digital public infrastructure, offering partners a distinct, transparent alternative in infrastructure financing.
- ④ **Keep ASEAN at the centre.** Align India's initiatives with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the IPOI pillars, so that the region reads India as a partner in development, not a party to rivalry.

PYO LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

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UPSC has asked about the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, India's Act East policy (<https://ujjayari.com/terms/act-east-policy/>) and the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean. This editorial reframes those themes around the economic pillar, which is exactly the layered, applied analysis the examiner rewards over a list of naval initiatives.

Practice question: “A free and open Indo-Pacific depends more on connectivity and trade than on the presence of warships.” Critically examine with reference to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Ministry of External Affairs* (<https://www.mea.gov.in/>), *ASEAN* (<https://asean.org/>)

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