

THE GRAND INDO-PACIFIC CHESSBOARD: ANALYZING INDIA'S ROLE AND ITS GEOSTRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

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INTRODUCTION:

The new competition called the 'New Great Game' involves the United States, China, and emerging players like India, Russia, Brazil, and African nations like Nigeria. This modern version is similar to the historical 'Great Game,' known as *Bolshaya Igra* in Russian, and represents a big change in global economic dynamics. After the industrial revolution, the economic centre shifted from Europe to America, but now it has quickly moved back to Asia. This shift started with the rise of the East Asian Tigers in the 1960s and became more noticeable after the 1980s when India and China began to industrialize rapidly. Since the early 1990s, Asia has consistently outpaced Europe and America in economic growth, becoming the main hub of global economic activity. Asia's share of global GDP and trade has significantly grown, and the continent is now deeply integrated with advanced economies through complex global value chains. This economic rise has benefited the world by enhancing welfare through trade. However, unresolved territorial disputes have raised significant concerns about maintaining a "good maritime order" based on adherence to established international laws and norms (Khurana, 2019, p 60).

The New Great Game marks a profound shift in the global economic and geopolitical order, with Asia emerging as the epicenter of growth and competition. India has developed a comprehensive and robust framework to navigate its Indo-Pacific strategy, marked by the deployment of a sophisticated and well-coordinated apparatus. This mechanism is designed to both identify emerging challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific and introspectively refine India's policies in the region. India's strategic approach centered on geo-economic engagement, maritime security, and multilateral partnerships reflects its ambition to secure a leadership role in shaping the new global order. However, the scenario shifted in the 21st century, prompting India to pivot towards the maritime sphere. India reinvigorated its engagement in the Indian Ocean by initiating the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 1997, aimed at fostering regional collaboration (Joshi, 2019, p. 44). While often associated with concepts like the 'Modi Doctrine', a term popularized by Dr. C. Raja Mohan during

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Prime Minister Modi's first term in 2014, preceding the articulation of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)-India's Indo-Pacific policy extends beyond such official declarations (Khurana, 2019). The SAGAR initiative, started in 2015, was strengthened further. Recognizing the need to address unconventional security challenges in the East Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, India officially joined the Indo-Pacific framework in 2018. Prime Minister Modi outlined India's vision and policy for the Indo-Pacific at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, promoting a "transparent and inclusive framework in the Indo-Pacific region, based on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations" (MEA, 2021). Prime Minister's address was followed by the launch Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) in November 2019 which added more clarity to India's vision. India has further advanced its role as a thought leader, emphasizing regional cooperation in areas such as maritime ecology, disaster resilience, and connectivity. As India balances partnerships and asserts its strategic autonomy, it emerges as a crucial player in the New Great Game, contributing to regional stability and global economic progress. The Narendra Modi-led government has been proactive in transforming articulated visions into actionable strategies, signalling India's intent to be a key player in shaping the region's future. From high-level diplomatic initiatives to concrete projects and multilateral collaborations, these efforts underscore India's commitment to the Indo-Pacific as a central pillar of its foreign policy. Recent developments highlight India's resolve to not only assert its presence but to actively contribute to the principles of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific is poised to shape the trajectory of the 21st century, particularly in areas such as economic growth, security, and post-pandemic recovery. Many countries and organizations, including the USA, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, France, Germany, and the European Union, have formulated detailed strategies for the Indo-Pacific, often complemented by targeted programs like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), introduced by the Biden administration (Vinh, 2023, p. 22). These initiatives hold significant implications for India, given its strategic importance in the region. While India and China exhibit shared interests in aspects like boosting bilateral trade and combating non-state threats such as terrorism and piracy, the broader regional dynamics present opportunities and challenges for India's strategic positioning. The study examines India's Indo-Pacific strategy through a realist lens, emphasizing state interests, power dynamics, and strategic autonomy. Prioritizing security, sovereignty, and survival, India aligns its geostrategic goals with national priorities, balancing partnerships like the Quad while avoiding formal alliances. It leverages maritime initiatives like SAGAR to counter regional threats and China's influence. As both a civilizational entity and modern state, India navigates volatile dynamics through economic diplomacy, naval security, and non-traditional threat

responses, ensuring its influence in the Indo-Pacific.

MAJOR PLAYER'S OF INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES:

USA

The concept of the Indo-Pacific gained prominence in U.S. policy discussions during President Obama's tenure and became more defined under President Trump. It now plays a crucial role in U.S. strategic documents, with various departments publishing their own Indo-Pacific strategies. The Department of State's 2019 report, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, outlined key principles such as regional security, prosperity, and resilience. The Department of Defense followed with its *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, and the U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific was declassified. In 2022, the Biden administration further emphasized the region's importance through its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which highlights cooperation with allies to maintain peace and prosperity while addressing China's growing influence. The strategy focuses on military alliances, maritime security, and defense partnerships. Economically, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) aims to strengthen ties but faces limitations. While it sets standards for labour, environment, and clean energy, it offers little in terms of market access, technology transfer, or financial aid. The IPEF's focus on American standards without major trade incentives reflects the protectionist policies that led the U.S. to exit the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Japan

The concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" was introduced by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, emphasizing cooperation among democracies in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions to ensure freedom of navigation and movement of goods, people, and capital, which are crucial for prosperity. This idea gained traction following a boat collision incident in 2010 and Abe's suggestion in 2012 to form a democratic alliance involving Japan, the USA, India, and Australia to safeguard global public goods (Lee, 2016 p. 285). Over time, Japan has consistently advocated for this vision, which prioritizes maritime security due to Japan's economic dependence on open sea routes and its territorial dispute with China. Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, now termed a vision, has expanded military cooperation with 15 countries by 2021 (Affairs, 2021). While rooted in security concerns, Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy increasingly emphasizes economic prosperity as a foundation for regional security. Through its US\$200 billion Quality Infrastructure initiative, Japan supports connectivity projects across Asia and Africa, offering an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative by promoting transparency, sustainability, and collaboration with the US, EU, and Australia in infrastructure development (Affairs, 2021).

Australia

Australia's Indo-Pacific approach is shaped by key policy documents like the 2016 defence white paper and the 2017 foreign policy white paper, which emphasize a stable, inclusive, and prosperous region (Australia Government, 2017). The country stresses the importance of international laws, norms, and open markets for its security and prosperity, aligning with Japan and the USA in prioritizing maritime security. Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper highlights growing congestion and disputes in regional seas, advocating for adherence to UNCLOS to ensure freedom of navigation and protect coastal states' rights (Australia Government, 2017). Acknowledging potential future conflicts, Australia plans to bolster its defence capabilities and enhance cooperation through joint naval exercises, information sharing, and research with nations such as the USA, Japan, India, Indonesia, South Korea, and ASEAN members. Connectivity and infrastructure finance also play a crucial role in Australia's Indo-Pacific vision, with concerns about these projects being used for strategic influence. Australia supports transparency, sustainability, and private sector involvement in such projects (Australia Government, 2017).

ASEAN

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, released in mid-2019, underscores ASEAN's central role in the region's evolving geopolitical landscape. It promotes an inclusive vision that welcomes all nations, avoiding designations of partners or rivals, and emphasizes the need to avoid mistrust and zero-sum thinking. "ASEAN centrality" is highlighted as the guiding principle for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Maritime cooperation is a key priority, with a focus on resolving disputes peacefully through international law. Unlike the military-focused strategies of the USA, Japan, and Australia, ASEAN's approach extends beyond security to include environmental protection, sustainable marine resource management, and the promotion of a blue economy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). The second major theme is connectivity, aiming to enhance physical, institutional, and people-to-people links across Indo-Pacific nations. The outlook advocates for seamless regional integration through initiatives like the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity 2025, with a focus on environmental sustainability. However, it avoids addressing financial sustainability or private sector involvement (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). Additionally, the outlook outlines areas for cooperation, including trade facilitation, digital economy, support for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises, and preparing for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It also emphasizes smart infrastructure, climate change, disaster risk management, and South-South cooperation, though without extensive details (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Overall Strategy, Emerging Institutions and Regional Architecture

The strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific is complex and layered. Major countries and regional organizations are working to establish an open, rules-based, inclusive region free from coercion, grounded in democratic values and norms. This aims to ensure free trade and respect for international law and sovereignty. Concerns over challenges to this rules-based order have led to various initiatives for bilateral, regional, and global cooperation. Programs like the Blue Dot Network, Build Back Better World (B3W), and Japan's Quality Infrastructure initiative offer alternatives to China's Belt and Road initiative. Additionally, Japan and Australia's efforts like RCEP, CPTPP, and the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with India emphasize economic diversification away from China. The US's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) seeks to reengage economically with the region to counter China's influence. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) has four main policy goals: enhancing digital trade and standards, creating strong and reliable supply chains, implementing clean energy initiatives, and promoting a fair economy by ensuring effective taxation and eliminating corruption. Since the United States is not part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the IPEF aims to influence the economic structure of the Indo-Pacific region without offering direct market access.

European countries are also adjusting their strategies to become more involved in the Indo-Pacific. Germany and France, for example, are focused on promoting a free and inclusive political environment in the region. France has already taken steps to engage, while Germany has released its guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, indicating its intention to play a more significant political and security role there. The Netherlands is also looking to increase its cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. The Indo-Pacific is seen as a region with significant political and military tensions but also a centre for economic growth. This dual nature has created opportunities for both global and regional cooperation. However, the establishment of formal institutions to support this cooperation has been limited. Countries in the region emphasize that they are not trying to create new regional institutions; instead, they aim to strengthen cooperation through existing frameworks and mechanisms. They recognize the importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and stress deeper engagement with ASEAN-led structures like the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the East Asia Summit. Despite ASEAN's cautious approach and the development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), it remains to be seen whether ASEAN's central role will be reflected in actual actions or remain a theoretical concept. In the absence of a single pan-Indo-Pacific institution, a network of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral partnerships is shaping the economic and security landscape of the region.

IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA AND THE WAY FORWARD

In the twenty-first century, Indo-Pacific region places significant importance on India by highlighting the country as a key player. The Indo-Pacific strategies of various countries and regional groups differ significantly. On one hand, the United States has adopted a confrontational stance, with its strategy cantered on containing China. On the other end, ASEAN and European approaches while expressing concerns for freedom of navigation, have taken a more inclusive route that incorporates China. Despite these differences, these strategies intersect at several points. Additionally, India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative aligns with the strategies of other countries and regions at multiple actionable points, creating numerous opportunities for India. All participating countries agree on the importance of freedom of navigation and the respect for international laws. They collectively advocate for the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international laws, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In simpler words, apart from ASEAN, all participating countries support increasing naval and military cooperation with like-minded nations to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation. This shared focus on maritime security allows India to strengthen its naval and military ties with these countries to protect its waters and shipping routes. Besides maritime security, the countries also emphasize sustainable use of marine resources (especially combating illegal fishing), promoting the blue economy, reducing maritime pollution, and addressing climate change-induced sea level rise in their Indo-Pacific strategies. Since India faces these challenges too, the Indo-Pacific realignment offers India a chance to boost financial and technological cooperation with advanced countries to jointly tackle climate change and other maritime issues.

In tracing India's Indo-Pacific vision, three key points emerge shaping New Delhi's Indo Pacific approach. First, the region is a theatre of opportunity for India allowing it to leverage partnerships to address a new strategic and security environment. These partnerships allow New Delhi to significantly expand its strategic and diplomatic footprint through collaborative initiatives. Second, apart from the partnerships with western powers, Island Nations and littoral countries are equally important and have played a greater role in shaping India's Indo-Pacific Outlook. Third, despite expanding collaborations across the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean is and will remain the primary theatre for New Delhi's strategic interests. While India will continue to increase its global engagements, New Delhi will invest its resources and capital primarily to elevate its strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

All Indo-Pacific vision documents emphasize the importance of working closely with countries in the region to enhance various forms of connectivity, including transportation,

digital, and human connectivity. Most Indo-Pacific strategies, with the notable exception of ASEAN, also support the development of high-quality connectivity infrastructure projects to ensure sustainability and transparency. The emphasis on sustainability, along with a readiness to partner and collaborate with like-minded nations to improve infrastructure financing for Indo-Pacific countries, indicates that, despite differences in approach and emphasis, all Indo-Pacific participating countries-except ASEAN-aim to offer a collective alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The establishment of the Blue Dot Network (BDN) and the announcement of the \$40 trillion Build Back Better World initiatives by G7 countries last year support this notion (Vinh, 2023 p. 30). Since connectivity is a key pillar of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), it provides India with opportunities to develop partnerships with participating countries. These collaborations could focus on connectivity projects not only within India but also in neighbouring countries where India is already financing several infrastructure projects. Despite differences in focus and underlying intentions, the digital agenda is important in the strategies of all Indo-Pacific countries. For the USA, cyber security is a top priority. US documents openly highlight the security risks associated with the use of Chinese hardware and propose working with Indo-Pacific countries to minimize these risks. The Indo-Pacific vision shared by the EU, Australia, and Japan includes a strong emphasis on cyber security and combating digital misinformation. India also aligns with these concerns. The anxiety caused by China's dominance in 5G technology has led India and other participating countries to consider collaborating on 6G and other emerging technologies to address security issues. Besides cyber security, all Indo-Pacific countries stress the importance of promoting digital trade and cross-border data flow. This vision advocates for a global digital governance model that opposes data localization, which contrasts with India's stance. India has not only stayed away from on-going WTO discussions on digital trade but has also implemented regulations to ensure data localization. Despite India's current position, staying out of on-going negotiations to set global norms for digital governance may not be a viable option given the anticipated changes. India should engage with Indo-Pacific participating countries on platforms such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to highlight its concerns and avoid being left behind. The economic foundations of the Indo-Pacific strategy are still evolving. All Indo-Pacific participating countries are deeply integrated economically with China, with significant investments from their firms in China, which remains a key source of their competitiveness. However, foreign firms face market access and intellectual property rights challenges in China. Therefore, it is not surprising that except for the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook, the Indo-Pacific strategies of all countries advocate for free, fair, reciprocal trade and a liberal economic regime. These countries express a desire to increase trade integration with Indo-Pacific nations and view

free trade agreements as a way forward. Notably, the trade agendas of these countries do not exclude China, suggesting they seek trade realignment without compromising their economic competitiveness and efficiency.

COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized more on the importance of supply chain diversification. Japan and Australia, which previously did not emphasize supply chain diversification in their Indo-Pacific strategies, have now started focusing on it. Similarly, the USA's recently launched Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) has identified a resilient economy as one of its pillars for cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. This includes establishing an early warning system, mapping critical mineral supplies, and implementing coordinated diversification measures. The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy also highlights supply chain diversification as a priority. The growing emphasis on supply chain diversification in Indo-Pacific strategies presents a promising opportunity for India. With a strong manufacturing base, a skilled workforce, and recent efforts to enhance manufacturing competitiveness through infrastructure upgrades, regulatory reforms, and fiscal incentives under the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, India has the potential to become a preferred destination for multinationals looking to shift part of their production out of China. Although a detailed study is needed to identify mutually beneficial and economically viable products, some products are well-suited for inclusion in supply chain diversification efforts. Rare Earth Elements (REE) are one such group of items. The supply chain for Rare Earth Elements (REE) is heavily concentrated, prompting countries such as Japan, the USA, and EU member states to seek diversification. With the fifth-largest REE reserves, India has the potential to become an alternative source for REE supply. Additionally, various products under the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, including active pharmaceutical ingredients (API), semiconductors, medical instruments, and electronics, show promise. India should pinpoint specific products within these sectors and collaborate with Indo-Pacific countries to develop a joint strategy for diversifying the supply chain of these selected products.

CONCLUSION

India's role in the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly central to shaping the region's geostrategic dynamics. As a rising power, India's focus on maintaining a balance of power while preserving its strategic autonomy is vital. The Indo-Pacific presents both challenges and opportunities for India, from managing its relationships with major powers like the United States and China, to deepening ties with regional actors such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN nations. India's active participation in multilateral initiatives, such as the Quad, showcases its commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, reinforcing the principles of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution. India's

geostrategic imperatives in the Indo-Pacific are driven by its economic, security, and diplomatic interests. Energy security, trade routes, and regional stability are of paramount importance, as is countering China's growing assertiveness. Thus, India's approach remains multi-dimensional, combining defence modernization, strategic partnerships, and soft power diplomacy. By continuing to engage constructively, India not only seeks to secure its own national interests but also plays a key role in shaping the evolving regional order, contributing to a more balanced and stable Indo-Pacific architecture. Ensuring security, stability, and adherence to rules by all countries in the region is essential for maintaining multipolarity. Smaller states in the region expect India to enhance their economic and military options, and India should strive to meet these expectations. To address the challenges in the Indo-Pacific, India needs strong naval capabilities, multilateral diplomacy, and economic integration with other nations, adhering to its vision of the Indian Ocean, such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative. While as India continues to invest heavily in positioning itself as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, its long-term success will depend on its ability to navigate the region's evolving complexities, maintain strategic autonomy, and effectively align its expanding interests with its overarching vision for the region.

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