

India's Strategic Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: A Blueprint for Regional Security

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Abstract: *The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a pivotal nexus of geopolitical and economic activities, characterised by a complex interplay of power dynamics and strategic interests. India has developed a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy focused on enhancing regional stability and security while seizing economic opportunities to achieve its geopolitical goals. This approach emphasises building strong regional partnerships and leveraging India's growing economic and military power to positively shape the region's future. This research paper endeavours to explore the economic potentials and regional implications of India's Indo-Pacific strategy, meticulously elucidating the salient facets and opportunities available to India and its regional allies. Moreover, it provides an exhaustive analysis of the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, critically assessing India's role as a strategic architect in shaping the regional order. The research paper aims to scrutinise the implications of power asymmetry and economic disparities on the trajectory of regional development, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the intricate interdependencies that define this vital region.*

Key Words: Pacific, India, China, Strategy, Asia

India's Indo-Pacific Policy

The term "Indo-Pacific" has gained considerable geopolitical significance since its emergence in policy discourse around 2007, reflecting a shift in the strategic landscape of international relations. This evolution can be understood through various lenses of International Politics, including balance of power theory, regional security dynamics, and the concept of collective security. Despite the increasing relevance of the Indo-Pacific region as a focal point for global powers, India's engagement has been characterised by a cautious and often ambivalent approach. This hesitance may stem from a complex interplay of factors, including historical legacies, regional insecurities, and the desire to maintain strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world. The ambivalence in India's positioning can be analysed through its need to balance relations with key stakeholders such as the United States, China, and its immediate neighbours. While the U.S. and its allies have advocated for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific to counterbalance China's assertive policies, India has sought to navigate these pressures carefully, opting for a strategy that emphasises partnerships while avoiding overt alignments. India's Indo-Pacific doctrine is underwritten by its strategic autonomy, which is predicated on its unique objectives that are divergent from those of its regional interlocutors. The US Indo-Pacific vision, which posits its territorial expanse from Bollywood to Hollywood, situates India as the westernmost boundary of its strategic construct (The Diplomat, 2019). Australian policymakers often describe India and Australia as the "bookends" of the geopolitical sphere, which underscores the centrality of the Indian Ocean in shaping the Indo-Pacific security architecture (Brewster, 2018, May 30). Meanwhile, the US and Japan appear to be recalibrating their strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific, intending to counterbalance China's quest for regional dominance in both Southeast and Northeast Asia. The United States has articulated the Indo-Pacific region as a preemptive and defensive strategy in response to China's growing influence. However, India's stance on the primacy of China within the region remains ambivalent in its Indo-Pacific vision, which encompasses not only the Indian Ocean but also the contiguous landmasses from Africa to the Americas. An emphasis on trade and connectivity characterises India's Indo-Pacific strategy to carve out a unique and salient role in the region's growth and development. This approach has been envisaged as a productive framework to realise India's larger strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific arena.

In his 2018 address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated a vision for the Indo-Pacific as a diverse coalition of democracies, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations playing a crucial role in regional strategic architecture. The Ministry

of External Affairs clarified that this vision is not directed against any specific state, emphasising India's commitment to multilateralism and cooperative security. Modi's framework recognises China as a significant stakeholder, seeking to promote unimpeded access and foster a rules-based order grounded in mutual trust and benefit, thereby enhancing regional stability and collaborative engagement (Modi, 2018, June 1). The Indian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been actively pursuing a strategy of Indo-Pacific connectivity and growth, intending to project itself as a responsible and constructive actor in the region while also countering the perceived expansionist designs of China. In this regard, India has consistently emphasised the need for a well-regulated and transparent international trade system that ensures a level playing field for all stakeholders and seeks to build a fair, reasonable, and consistent Indo-Pacific economic environment that benefits all parties. Furthermore, India has sought to allay concerns about its motives vis-à-vis China by maintaining that its approach to the Indo-Pacific is not targeted at any one country but rather encompasses all nations in the region. This strategic hedging has been a recent hallmark of India's foreign policy. The Minister of State for External Affairs of India has ardently expressed India's aspiration for the establishment of an Indo-Pacific that reveres the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, freedom of navigation and overflight, unrestricted lawful commerce, peaceful dispute resolution, and a positive economic outlook for all. This vision is premised on the tenets of a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, is confident that the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) will engender enhanced trust, transparency, and efficiency, thereby bolstering the Indo-Pacific region's development, peace, and prosperity. We wholeheartedly endorse the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to transform the Indo-Pacific into a globally influential economic powerhouse (Ministry of External Affairs 2022). The adoption of this framework by the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs serves as a testament to the country's commitment to the principles of regionalism and multilateralism. By prioritising enhancing economic resilience, sustainability, inclusion, fairness, and competitiveness, India has demonstrated its unwavering dedication to promoting stability, prosperity, growth, and peace in the region. This move highlights India's proactive role in shaping the regional political economy and its willingness to engage in cooperative efforts to address shared challenges and opportunities. The MEA's decision to embrace this framework underscores the importance of regional cooperation in advancing collective interests and advancing a rules-based order in the international system.

Indo-Pacific Region and Uncertainty

India is currently navigating complex national security issues, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where major power rivalries have led to unstable and unpredictable dynamics. China's military expansion in the region, combined with the weakening of the United States, has sparked concerns about India's security obligations. Amidst the current global climate of uncertainty, India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, has stressed the need to prioritise India's national interests by leveraging the opportunities arising from global contradictions. In his book, Jaishankar advocates for India to expand to its fullest potential in a world of increasing opportunities. According to his thesis,

harmony can only be achieved when a significant number of individuals come to a consensus. (Jaishankar, 2020). In the aftermath of the Galwan Valley skirmish with China, India has adopted a diversified investment approach, eschewing the traditional strategy of singular market concentration. Notwithstanding this move, the Western powers, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, have refrained from expressing their objections towards China's actions or advocating for the evacuation of Chinese troops from the Himalayan border. This reluctance to act can be attributed to the concept of *realpolitik*, which prioritises pragmatic considerations over ethical or ideological concerns in international relations. According to Salvatore Babones, the QUAD is both ineffective and unnecessary as an anti-China lobbying group. He argues that Asian countries lack the motivation to form a military alliance aimed at countering China, much like the NATO-Warsaw Pact dynamic during the Cold War. Furthermore, the Biden administration's new Indo-Pacific policy avoids categorising the Galwan conflict as aggression and shows reluctance to support India openly (Babones, 2021).

As India strategically manoeuvres its foreign policy approach towards China, New Delhi has identified Moscow as a crucial and reliable ally in the Indo-Pacific region. However, Russia's involvement in the region has added a layer of complexity to India's foreign policy calculus. Despite Russia's intervention in Ukraine, India has remained supportive of the nation, demonstrating its alignment with the realist approach to international relations. While the situation in Ukraine may not be directly linked to the Indo-Pacific region, it is crucial to comprehend India's hedging strategy, which aims to balance its relations with both China and Russia while safeguarding its national interests. This underscores the importance of understanding the complex interplay of various actors and factors that shape the global geopolitical landscape. Happymon Jacob explicates the implicit pro-Russian dispositions by highlighting that an aggressive Russia poses a predicament for the US and the West rather than for India. He further contends that the growth of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation should be a concern for Russia, not India. To counterbalance China's increasing influence in the region, India requires the support of major powers such as the US, the West, and Russia (Jacob, 2016). At present, Russia holds a significant position as India's key ally in Asia. India is currently grappling with challenges posed by China, Pakistan, and the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. To counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, India relies on the backing of the United States and the West. However, the intricacies of today's international political landscape require India to strike a delicate balance between its varying interests and navigate these challenges with care. Jaishankar highlights that in the current geopolitical climate, India must proactively engage with the United States, maintain a careful balancing act with China, cultivate deeper ties with Europe, pursue a policy of reassurance with Russia, involve Japan as a strategic partner, integrate neighbouring countries into its foreign policy calculus, expand its sphere of influence, and reinforce traditional alliances (Jaishankar, 2017). Given the challenges posed by the Indo-Pacific region, India's strategic thinking is primarily focused on hedging, which involves pursuing multiple, diverse foreign policy options to mitigate risk and uncertainty.

The current state of affairs between India and most

China is primarily influenced by the power asymmetry and geopolitical uncertainty that stems from the tyranny of geography. Nevertheless, India's official response to this situation is further complicated by the nature of its direct engagement with China. Despite sharing a lengthy border, the two nations remain at odds with each other over the Line of Actual Control, which constitutes the most protracted unresolved territorial dispute between them. Unfortunately, India finds itself ensnared by the tyranny of geography, with its proximity to and ongoing territorial conflicts with China, such as the one in Galwan. To mitigate the threat posed by its powerful and assertive neighbour, New Delhi must exercise a judicious balance between containment and engagement. C. Raja Mohan posits that India's Sino-centric proximity is a critical factor impacting the Sino-Indian relationship. Mohan contends that the majority of Asia is situated in the front yard, fraught with apprehension about the US's reliability towards Asia and anxious over the economic repercussions that Beijing has pledged to impose on Australia (Mohan, 2021). Despite these concerns, the majority of Asia remains noncommittal towards Beijing, opting for neutrality. This phenomenon of neutralisation can be interpreted as a form of strategic hedging. India has been pursuing engagement with other Indo-Pacific nations to contain China, but it is averse to assuming a leadership role. India is apprehensive about the alliance of democracies that the QUAD represents, which is aimed at countering China, as it is based far away. India has learned from the Galwan clashes that distant water does not put out a neighbouring fire. India's geographic proximity to China necessitates a cautious diplomatic approach to avoid provoking its rising neighbour. An optimal hedging strategy for India would involve simultaneously engaging with China while aligning with its competitors to bolster India's geopolitical position. This dual strategy appears to be the pragmatic and beneficial option in the current geopolitical landscape.

Strategic Autonomy and Self-reliance

India's ambition in state-building is deeply intertwined with the principles of anti-imperialist internationalism and non-alignment, while also prioritising the critical goal of economic growth. Despite post-Cold War expectations for India to abandon non-alignment, it continues to embrace this approach. India's contemporary strategic culture places significant emphasis on strategic autonomy and the pursuit of great power status in a multipolar world. Shyam Saran's definition of strategic autonomy as the government's ability to act independently on matters of vital national interest reflects the quintessential characteristic of a great power. Strategic autonomy ensures independence and policymaking flexibility in foreign affairs, which Indian strategists believe is necessary for great power status (Saran, 2015). India places a high value on strategic autonomy within its culture, as it is believed to be pivotal to the country's fate. As a component of its Indo-Pacific strategy, New Delhi is pursuing a policy of strengthening its relationships with other nations instead of avoiding them, to create interest-based alliances and coalitions that may evolve or change over time. As part of its "Act East" strategy, India has joined US geostrategic structures and made efforts towards ASEAN to safeguard itself from China's perceived threat.

This coalition pursued strategic autonomy by forging collaborative ties with China and adopting Chinese in

stitutional frameworks, thereby circumventing the influence of the United States.

To further safeguard their interests, they also maintained special relationships with Russia as a hedge against both China and the USA. The QUAD, a strategic partnership involving trilateral relations, enables China to attain strategic autonomy, while Western strategic autonomy is encouraged by RIC, BRICS, and SCO through their promotion of multipolarity and non-Western norms in global governance. Despite the geopolitical pressures and calls for alignment with the United States against China during the Galwan clashes, the Indian government has adopted a nuanced approach and made it clear that it will not join any alliance structure. As a responsible stakeholder in the international system, India recognises the benefits of working with different powers on different issues in a multipolar world. Foreign Minister Jaishankar has highlighted the advantages of multi-alignment, including the ability to maintain strategic autonomy, maximise national interests, and avoid entanglement in great power competition. By juggling many balls up in the air at the same time, India aims to display the confidence and dexterity required to pursue its foreign policy objectives while navigating complex international dynamics (Jaishankar, 2020).

Promoting PowerBalance

The Indo-Pacific policy of India revolves around the concept of strategic autonomy, wherein the nation's ability to make autonomous decisions regarding foreign policies is of utmost importance, especially in light of China's increasing strategic assertiveness. Although forging alliances may offer some immediate advantages, such as developing comprehensive national power and enhancing local capabilities, they are more viable and efficacious in the long run. There is a growing disparity in power across several areas between India and China, potentially leaving India vulnerable to coercion by China. To counter this, India is prioritising deterrence by denial. This involves bolstering its nuclear triad and space capabilities, as well as forming a new strike corps to thwart any aggressive actions by China. Additionally, India is making changes to its force posture, such as positioning its airpower and infrastructure closer to the Line of Actual Control. According to Rajesh Rajagopalan, India is encountering numerous obstacles as it endeavours to modernise its military. The Army Strike Corps' expensive price tag has led to a reduction in its size, while bureaucratic inefficiencies have caused infrastructure development to be delayed. Furthermore, the Indian Air Force has experienced a substantial decrease in squadron strength due to the tardiness in obtaining new equipment. Although India conducted nuclear tests twenty years ago, it is still in need of a long-range missile that can reach all regions of China from any of its territories (Rajagopalan, 2018).

The Indian Navy's modernisation efforts are encountering a major obstacle, particularly in the naval sector. Even though it received 19% of the military budget in 2010/11, it has been allocated the smallest portion of the defence budget, with only 15.5% in 2018/2019. Additionally, its share of capital expenditure has declined from 30% to 25% (Mukherjee, 2019). India's efforts to modernise its navy have been impeded significantly, particularly compared to China's burgeoning domestic manufacturing capabilities. As China's navy continues to expand in the coming years, it will likely create an imbalance in the maritime power dynamic, putting India in a challenging position. Should the QUAD materialise

as a counterbalance to China's dominance, India may become the weakest link in the group. To avoid this, New Delhi must take measures to close the power gap between the two nations. India must demonstrate that it is no longer the weakest link by investing more in its naval capabilities and upgrading its current fleet to keep pace with China's growing navy. If India is committed to establishing a multi-polar Asia free of Chinese hegemony, it must take on the arduous task of reducing the power disparity with China.

The Asia-Pacific region is currently witnessing a growing divergence between India's economic growth and that of its neighbouring economies. India's Act East policy, which seeks to enhance Indo-Pacific trade and connectivity, has so far failed to address the underlying challenges faced by the country's regional economy. Despite superficial economic cooperation agreements with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN, India remains only peripherally integrated with the region. Meanwhile, China's trade surplus with other Indo-Pacific nations has continued to expand, further exacerbating the economic gap. This phenomenon highlights the challenges of regional integration and the need for greater economic cooperation and integration among countries in the region. India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), considered to be the world's largest free trade agreement, has had a significant impact on its Indo-Pacific policy. Disengaging from trade discussions has led to negative consequences for India. Due to financial constraints, India cannot afford to participate in discussions on the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The absence of the United States from RCEP and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has led to mistrust in the Indo-Pacific concept outside of India. According to the analysis conducted by Evan Feigenbaum, a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the establishment of a unified framework of regulations and norms for the entire Asian continent, excluding the "Indo" and "Pacific" economies, is necessary. However, the term "Indo-Pacific" loses its relevance if the Asia-Pacific region is not included. India risks losing out on the potential economic benefits that come with the next wave of globalisation and regional economic integration if it fails to link its economy with the rest of Asia-Pacific. In the absence of economic unity, India's Act East policy may not be able to achieve its objectives; instead, it may only serve to position India as a mere "doorman" for the Indo-Pacific region (Feigenbaum, 2018).

The Indo-Pacific necessitates a robust political-economic architecture that fosters robust economic interconnections among its constituent members. Despite strategic dialogues and military collaboration, the economic rationale will ultimately prevail. Nevertheless, India's ambition to be a part of the Indo-Pacific is impeded by its internal and structural uncertainties regarding RCEP. To achieve its objective, India must overcome the obstacle of integrating with the Asian economic miracle, which poses a significant hurdle to its Indo-Pacific aspirations (Jacob, 2020).

CONCLUSION

India's Indo-Pacific strategy embodies a multifaceted geopolitical paradigm shift that underscores the nation's aspiration to augment its strategic autonomy while navigating an increasingly multifarious regional order. As New Delhi strategically aligns with like-minded partners, its

approach evaluates the dynamics of power projection, maritime security, and regional connectivity through a prism of multipolarity. The interplay of hegemonic ambitions, emerging forms of soft power, and complex interdependencies will shape the trajectory of India's regional influence. As the Indo-Pacific becomes a theatre of great power competition, India's calibrated engagement must reconcile its developmental aspirations with the imperatives of collective security, ensuring that its strategy not only mitigates regional hostilities but also reinforces the normative frameworks underpinning the international order. The impending processes and prospects will necessitate a nuanced understanding of transnational flows, domestic resilience, and the sociopolitical intricacies that dictate the geopolitical landscape in an era characterised by uncertainty and flux.

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