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India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Strengthening Partnerships and Navigating Challenges

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point of global geopolitics, reshaping international relations and economic growth dynamics. India's strategic approach to this region significantly impacts regional stability, freedom of navigation, and the balance of power in the vast area that pans from the eastern shores of Africa to the Western Pacific. This paper explores India's evolving strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, emphasising its commitment to regional stability, freedom of navigation, and balance of power. It lists key initiatives like the Act East Policy, SAGAR Vision, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, which aim to enhance economic ties, strengthen strategic partnerships, and promote regional security. Additionally, the paper highlights challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and the need for greater integration in India's partnerships with ASEAN, Japan, and other regional players. The paper concludes by underlining India's role in advocating a rules-based order and its growing importance in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point of global geopolitics, reshaping international relations and economic growth dynamics. As a key player in this vast maritime space, India's strategy for the Indo-Pacific has drawn significant attention from policymakers and analysts worldwide. The country's evolving stance on this geographical expanse has implications for regional stability, freedom of navigation, and the balance of power in an area extending from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific.

Though not formally codified in a white paper, India's Indo-Pacific strategy has been taking shape through various policy pronouncements and actions (Mukherjee, 2023). Despite initial hesitation, India has approached the Indo-Pacific through the vision of SAGAR, Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and the Quad. This paper explores the key elements of India's strategy, including its efforts to strengthen strategic partnerships, enhance maritime cooperation, and position itself as a regional security provider. This paper also looks at how India navigates challenges in the Indo-Pacific and has adapted its foreign policy to address the evolving realities of the region.

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Map denoting the Indo-Pacific as a Geostrategic space



Source: Camroux (2021)

India's initial hesitation towards the Indo-Pacific concept

Till the early 2000s, India was hesitant to fully embrace the Indo-Pacific concept due to a mix of historical, strategic, and regional factors. This cautious approach has been shaped by India's path of strategic autonomy and its complex relationships with major global powers. The Indo-Pacific region gained significance in India's foreign policy after August 2007, when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered a landmark speech to the Indian Parliament, titled "Confluence of the Two Seas" (Heiduk, 2020).

Since independence, India's foreign policy has prioritised strategic autonomy, avoiding alignment with major powers. The adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept by Western allies, particularly the U.S., raised fears that India might lose its independent stance (Ladwig, 2024) (Tzinieris et.al., 2023). Delhi remains cautious of provoking Beijing, especially given China's deepening ties with Russia, a long-time strategic partner of India (Tzinieris et.al, 2023). While prioritising strategic autonomy, India is also exploring ways to safeguard its security and shape the regional order to maintain its status and identity. As the relationship with the U.S. grew stronger, India wanted to ensure that it was not perceived as aligning too closely with Washington's strategy in Asia.

A significant reason for India's initial reluctance was the perception that the Indo-Pacific strategy might be aimed at containing China. In the mid-2010s, India was carefully balancing its relationships with China and key democratic states in Asia, and it was wary of being seen as part of a Western-led effort to counter Beijing (Pant, 2020). India was concerned that adopting the Indo-Pacific strategy would force it to openly oppose China's actions, which could undermine its influence in the region and compromise its strategic autonomy (Verma, 2024).

India's priorities in the Indo-Pacific also differed from those of early adopters like Australia, Japan, and the U.S., who focused more on the Western Pacific than the Indian Ocean. New Delhi eventually embraced the concept and put forward its vision in a speech to Prime Minister Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 (Varma, 2024).

Securing its interests in the Indian Ocean was paramount for India, and it needed to define its own approach to the Indo-Pacific. While India's stance evolved, its relationship with the US played a key role in shaping this approach and leading to increased cooperation in defence and security through initiatives like the Quad and the 2+2 Dialogue (Pardesi, 2023).

Over time, India navigated its initial hesitations and became a central player in the Indo-Pacific framework, balancing its strategic interests with its longstanding principle of exercising strategic autonomy.

Factors driving India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific

India's initial hesitation to fully embrace the Indo-Pacific concept shifted to a more proactive stance due to several key factors that reshaped its regional strategy.

China's increasing economic and political involvement in South Asia was a major reason for India's shift. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) raised concerns in New Delhi about losing influence in its traditional sphere (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives started leaning towards Beijing. For example, Sri Lanka leased the Hambantota Port to China for 99 years after failing to repay its debts, positioning China strategically in the Indian Ocean (The Hindu, 2017). Similarly, Bangladesh became a major buyer of Chinese military equipment and saw Chinese investments in its ports, further cementing China's regional presence (Indian Defence Research Wing, 2024).

Escalating border tensions have also influenced India's China policy. The 2020 clash between India and China in the Galwan Valley, the first since the Sino-Indian War of 1962, marked a significant deterioration in bilateral relations. This, along with other clashes and increased Chinese incursions, led India to rethink its strategy, focusing on building military capabilities and strengthening external partnerships instead of seeking accommodation with China (Centre for New American Security, 2023).

As India faced regional challenges, it aligned with Japan, which expressed concerns about China's assertiveness. In 2015, India and Japan issued a joint vision for a peaceful, open, and rule-based Indo-Pacific order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). This partnership allowed India to enhance its strategic presence in the region, balance China's influence, and shape the regional order without being viewed strictly as aligning with the West. The Agreement on Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services, also known as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), was signed between Japan and India in 2020. This landmark agreement establishes a framework for exchanging

supplies and services between Japan's Self-Defence Forces and the Indian Armed Forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs- Japan, 2020). In a Joint Statement of the third Indo-Japan 2+2 dialogue (involving defence and foreign ministers) held in New Delhi in August 2024, the two nations 'reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining and strengthening rules-based international order founded on the principles of the UN Charter, respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and peaceful settlement of disputes without resorting to the threat or use of force and emphasised the need for all countries to refrain from any attempt to change the unilateral status quo'(Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The joint statement also noted the need to revise and update the security cooperation joint declaration inked in October 2008 'to reflect contemporary priorities and be responsive to contemporary security challenges facing them' (Kakar, 2024).

India's foreign policy initiatives and diplomatic engagements

India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is centred on inclusiveness, cooperation, and sustainable development. This approach, guided by the Act East Policy, SAGAR vision, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), focuses on boosting economic ties, building strategic partnerships, and fostering cultural exchanges, particularly with ASEAN countries. Through these initiatives, India promotes a rules-based international order and enhances regional stability.

Key frameworks and initiatives

- **Act East Policy:** Launched in 2014, this policy expands upon the 1990s Look East Policy. It seeks to deepen India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region by enhancing economic cooperation, strategic partnerships, connectivity, and cultural links with ASEAN countries. It seeks to strengthen relationships with Japan,

South Korea, and Australia, promoting a free, open, and inclusive regional order (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2023).

- **SAGAR Vision:** Introduced in 2015, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) focuses on maritime security, regional collaboration, and sustainable development. It outlines a strategy to protect India's interests, strengthen ties with neighbouring countries, encourage regional peace and security, and engage constructively with external powers (The Hindu, 2024).
- **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI):** Launched in 2019, the IPOI addresses maritime security, environmental sustainability, and economic cooperation, in alignment with ASEAN's vision for the Indo-Pacific (Indian Council of World Affairs, 2022). The IPOI comprises seven pillars viz. (a) Maritime Security; (b) Maritime Ecology; (c) Maritime Resources; (d) Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; (e) Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; (f) Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and (g) Trade, Connectivity and Maritime Transport. Each of these pillars encompasses critical issues that warrant careful consideration and action.

Significant initiatives:

- **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS):** India's initiative to promote greater maritime cooperation among the navies of Indian Ocean nations.
- **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA):** At the 2022 QUAD Summit in Tokyo the IPMDA was launched. This program offers partners advanced, real-time radio frequency data to enhance maritime monitoring, address illegal fishing, manage climate and disaster responses, and enforce maritime laws more effectively (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

Additionally, India leverages its soft power through cultural projects like Project Mausam, which strengthens historical and cultural links across the Indian Ocean region (Press Information Bureau, 2024).

Table 1 Elements of India's Indo-Pacific Vision Manifested by PM Modi at 2018's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore

- Free, open, and inclusive region embracing all nations for common progress and prosperity
- Southeast Asia and ASEAN at the centre of India's vision for regional peace and security
- Common rules-based order based on dialogue, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and equality of all nations
- Equal access to common spaces with freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful dispute resolution
- Open and stable international trade regime, opposing protectionism and supporting a balanced trade environment
- Connectivity initiatives based on respect for sovereignty, good governance, transparency, and sustainability, without creating debt burdens
- Cooperation over rivalry in Asia, with partnerships based on shared values and interests, avoiding conflicts and disputes

Source: Ministry of External Affairs (2018)

Through these various initiatives and engagements, India aims to promote regional integration, foster collaborative problem-solving, and contribute to the emergence of a multipolar Asia. This approach reflects India's broader foreign policy objectives of maintaining stability, enhancing security, and promoting prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region.

Economic connectivity and regional partnerships

India's economic strategies in the Indo-Pacific reflect its growing influence and commitment to regional prosperity. These strategies aim to enhance connectivity, promote economic cooperation, and uphold a rules-based international order. By leveraging its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific and deepening diplomatic ties, India seeks to unlock the region's economic potential while ensuring stability and predictability for trade and investment.

A key aspect of this approach is the partnership with Japan, formed in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This collaboration has led to the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, connecting Asia and Africa through the Indian Ocean as an alternative to China's Maritime Silk Road (Times of India, 2024).

India's Act East policy strengthened ties with ASEAN, a major trade partner. ASEAN accounted for 11 percent of India's global trade with their trade reaching US\$122.67 billion in 2023-24 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, n.d.).

Similarly, India's relations with Japan and South Korea are also significant, with Japanese investments in India growing from 282 billion yen in 2014 to 641 billion yen in 2022, and South Korean FDI totalling US\$7.27 billion by December 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023) (Embassy of India- Seoul, 2023).

The development of India's Northeast Region (NER) as a gateway to Southeast Asia is crucial. The India-Japan Act East Forum, established in 2017, is central to this effort. Japan has committed 232.209 billion yen for nine projects, including NER connectivity (Business Standard, 2024).

India's participation in forums like ASEAN and Quad (with Australia, Japan, and the US) enhances its role as a facilitator, particularly in maritime security. The country is also expanding its diplomatic outreach to Africa, Europe, and the Pacific Islands, broadening engagement beyond trade to include political and strategic collaborations. India has become increasingly involved in various multilateral initiatives across the Indo-Pacific region, reflecting its growing strategic importance and multi-alignment approach. These groupings include several trilateral arrangements such as India-US-Japan, India-France-Australia, India-Australia-Indonesia, India-Japan-Australia, India-Japan-Italy, and the India-France-UAE. Such formations serve specific purposes, ranging from regional security cooperation to supply chain resilience and energy partnerships.

Such minilaterals allow India to maintain its strategic autonomy while engaging in issue-specific collaborations, navigate the complex US-China rivalry, and cooperate with middle powers on shared interests outside of explicit defence concerns (South Asian Voices, 2024). The proliferation of these arrangements underscores the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and the increasing importance of flexible, targeted diplomatic initiatives in addressing regional challenges.

The Sagarmala initiative of India taken in 2015 has been modernising India's port infrastructure and boosting port connectivity. It focuses on developing new ports, upgrading existing ones, and establishing coastal economic zones (CEZs) to stimulate economic activity. By improving port efficiency and reducing logistics costs, Sagarmala is expected to significantly enhance trade volumes and economic growth in the region.



Source: IAS Gyan (2022)

Similarly, the Bharatmala initiative seeks to improve road infrastructure by developing national highways and economic corridors to boost connectivity and trade efficiency across India. The Indian Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways is expected to come up with a new Ship Building and Ship Repair Policy soon (Press Information Bureau, 2024). This hopes to address the growing trend of Indian overseas and coastal cargo while at the same time dropping the share of the cargo carried by Indian owned/ flagged vessels have been falling over the past decade, the latter presently at only 5.4 percent (The Economic Times, 2024). Together, these initiatives strengthen India's role as a major economic player in the Indo-Pacific.

Naval modernisation

India has implemented comprehensive measures to enhance maritime security, including- strengthening surveillance and patrol capabilities, improving technical monitoring of coastal areas, establishing inter-agency coordination, regulating maritime activities, and integrating fishing and coastal communities.

The Indian Navy has bolstered maritime security by enhancing surveillance, inter-agency coordination, and coastal monitoring. The Indian Navy's 'Mission-Based Deployments' in the Indian Ocean align with the SAGAR's vision to promote regional cooperation and address threats.

It aims to enhance its marine security and preserve freedom of navigation. This narrative has been actualised through the maritime security strategy document titled 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015) document,' which articulately discusses its role and future ambitions in ensuring, amongst many other issues, maritime domain awareness, and its role as a net security provider and active participation in deterring non-traditional threats in the maritime domain through cooperation and collaboration (Indian Navy, 2016).

Addressing challenges and strengthening partnerships

India aims to strengthen its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, positioning itself alongside other major players, including China. However, its SAGAR initiative encounters challenges due to limited operational capacity and coordination, which could lessen its effectiveness compared to China's maritime power. Addressing these limitations and integrating SAGAR with Sagarmala could enhance naval infrastructure. The appointment of India's first National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC) in February 2022 marks a significant step towards enhancing naval security governance (National Maritime Foundation, 2022). To build on this progress states should consider appointing State Maritime Security Coordinators (SMSCs) to complement the NMSC's efforts. By taking these steps, India can create a more integrated, efficient, and responsive maritime security framework, better equipped to handle future challenges and opportunities in its coastal and oceanic domains. Similarly, incorporating the Indian

Coast Guard and aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals would improve regional security cooperation and collaboration.

India's partnership with Japan is crucial, but operational issues have hindered the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, highlighting the need to overcome bureaucratic inefficiencies and disparate capabilities for the profitability of joint initiatives. Furthermore, India's economic integration with ASEAN lags behind other regional powers, as evidenced by missing RCEP trade targets and withdrawing from the partnership. However, recent trade agreements with Australia and the UAE and participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework signal India's move towards free trade.

In response to China's increasing activities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India has bolstered naval operations and established new strategic bases. Since 2018, the Indian Navy has maintained mission-based deployments in the Indian Ocean, ensuring a continuous presence at key entry points. India's efforts, from disaster relief to anti-piracy operations, highlight its role as a regional first responder (Bhatt, 2024). New bases, including INS Jatayu in Lakshadweep and INS Kadamba near Karwar, have expanded India's operational reach and enhanced power projection in the Indian Ocean Region. Enhanced defence cooperation with regional countries and a focus on rules-based maritime order underscore India's commitment to securing trade routes and regional stability. To maintain its role as a First Responder and Preferred Security Partner, India must invest in naval modernisation and maritime domain awareness, balancing engagement, deterrence, and coalition building with cultural ties to strengthen its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific.

Given its existing Indo-Pacific stance, India must prioritise several crucial aspects for

future involvement in the region. It needs to bolster maritime capabilities and infrastructure, invest in naval modernisation, enhance maritime awareness, and develop strategic ports and bases. Establishing forward operating bases in strategic locations like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands enhances India's capacity to monitor and respond to Chinese naval activities (Singh, 2024). These bases serve as logistical hubs, enabling rapid deployment and maritime response, with upgraded infrastructure playing a key role. Strengthening economic connections, particularly with ASEAN, is also essential, with initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and reconsideration of regional trade agreements potentially enhancing India's economic influence.

Diplomatically, India must continue to strike a balance between exercising strategic autonomy and forging stronger partnerships. While maintaining foreign policy independence, India effectively collaborates within multilateral frameworks like the Quad and fosters bilateral relationships with key regional players and like-minded partners. Addressing non-traditional security challenges, such as climate change mitigation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and combating transnational crime, can further strengthen regional cooperation and boost India's soft power.

Conclusion

India's role as a major regional power in the Indo-Pacific is highlighted by its commitment to maintaining peace and prosperity through the vision of SAGAR and initiatives like the Act East Policy and IPOI. Despite challenges in economic integration and power balancing, India's multifaceted approach and focus on collaboration consolidates its position as a key player in the Indo-Pacific.

India's support of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and adherence

to international law, is central to its approach to the region. As the Indo-Pacific's centrality to global geopolitics and economics grows, India's role is also expected to increase. India can significantly influence the evolving Indo-Pacific order

by addressing internal challenges, leveraging strengths and cooperative opportunities, and maintaining a commitment to inclusive growth and cooperation.

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