

INDIA **AND** **INDO-PACIFIC** **POWER, STRATEGY AND** **NEW WORLD POLITICS**

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Preface

The twenty-first century belongs to the Indo-Pacific. This is not a prediction—it is already an unfolding reality. From the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, from the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea, the world's most consequential geopolitical dramas are playing out across this vast maritime expanse. The rise of China, the recalibration of American power, the resurgence of India, and the anxieties of middle powers caught between competing visions of regional order—all converge in this theatre of strategic competition and economic dynamism.

As great power rivalry intensifies, as supply chains fracture and realign, as new security architectures emerge to challenge or complement existing ones, the need for rigorous, theoretically grounded, and empirically rich analysis has never been more urgent. This book began as an inquiry into a puzzle: How does a rising power navigate a regional order increasingly defined by great power competition, without sacrificing its hard-won strategic autonomy? India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific concept—from initial scepticism to enthusiastic embrace—offered a compelling case study. But as research progressed, it became clear that the story was far more complex and consequential than a simple tale of strategic adaptation.

India's Indo-Pacific journey reflects deeper transformations in global politics: the erosion of American unipolarity, the assertive rise of China, the proliferation of minilateral security arrangements, the weaponization of economic interdependence, and the persistent tension between sovereignty and cooperation in an interconnected world. Understanding India's strategy thus requires grappling with

fundamental questions about power, order, and agency in contemporary international relations.

This book synthesizes insights from multiple theoretical traditions—realism, liberalism, constructivism—while remaining grounded in the empirical realities of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. It draws on official documents, strategic pronouncements, defence white papers, trade data, and the burgeoning scholarly literature on regional security dynamics. Particular attention has been paid to developments from 2023 through mid 2026, a period of remarkable flux in Indo-Pacific affairs: the maturation of the Quad from a nascent dialogue to a substantive partnership, the operationalization of AUKUS, India's deepening defence ties with the United States and its partners, and China's recalibrated approach to regional influence.

Several analytical choices deserve mention. First, while the book focuses on India, it situates Indian strategy within the broader regional context recognizing that India's choices both shape and are shaped by the actions of other major powers, middle powers, and regional institutions. Second, the analysis integrates geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions, rejecting artificial separation between security and economic domains in an era where they are increasingly intertwined. Third, the book takes seriously the role of ideas, strategic concepts, normative frameworks, identity narratives in shaping state behaviour, while remaining attentive to material constraints and power realities.

The Indo-Pacific is not a settled concept but a contested one, with different actors advancing competing visions of regional order. India's approach—emphasizing inclusivity, ASEAN centrality, and a rules-based order—represents one such vision. Whether this vision can be realized amid intensifying great power competition remains an open question. This book does not claim to predict the future, but rather to provide the analytical tools necessary for understanding the forces that will shape it.

Writing about contemporary geopolitics presents inherent challenges: events unfold rapidly, new data emerges, policies shift. Every effort has been made to incorporate the most recent developments through mid 2026, while recognizing that the Indo-Pacific story continues to evolve. The hope is that the conceptual frameworks and empirical foundations laid here will remain valuable even as specific circumstances change.

List Of Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
AAGC	Asia–Africa Growth Corridor
ADIZ	Air Defence Identification Zone
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus
AEP	Act East Policy
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AIFTA	ASEAN–India Free Trade Area
AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN+3	Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three
AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States Security Partnership
AUSINDEX	Australia–India Maritime Exercise
B3W	Build Back Better World
BBNJ	Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement
BBIN	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BOP	Balance of Payments
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative

BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CADC	Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CETA	Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement
CHEC	China Harbour Engineering Company
CMEC	China–Myanmar Economic Corridor
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
CSG	Carrier Strike Group
DPI	Digital Public Infrastructure
DSR	Digital Silk Road
EAS	East Asia Summit
ECTA	Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EMALS	Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System
EU	European Union
EXIM	Export–Import Bank of India

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FIPIC	Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of Twenty
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GGI	Global Governance Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
I2U2	India–Israel–United Arab Emirates–United States Group
iCET	Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology
IMEC	India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMT-TH	India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway
INSTC	International North–South Transport Corridor
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity
IPMDA	Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness

IPOI	Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative
IR	International Relations
IRBM	Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile
ISA	International Solar Alliance
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
IUU	Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (Fishing)
JBIC	Japan Bank for International Cooperation
KMTTP	Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project
LEP	Look East Policy
LIO	Liberal International Order
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MAHASAGAR	Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security Across the Regions
MAITRI	Medical Assistance Initiative for Treatment and Relief
MCF	Military-Civil Fusion
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MGC	Mekong–Ganga Cooperation
MILAN	Multilateral Naval Exercise
MNC	Multinational Corporation
MSDF	Maritime Self-Defence Force
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NER	North Eastern Region
NITI	National Institution for Transforming India
NMF	National Maritime Foundation

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ORF	Observer Research Foundation
PIWT&T	Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLI	Production-Linked Incentive
PoK	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir
PRC	People's Republic of China
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific Exercise
RIS	Research and Information System for Developing Countries
ROKN	Republic of Korea Navy
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SCRI	Supply Chain Resilience Initiative
SCS	South China Sea
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIMBEX	Singapore–India Maritime Bilateral Exercise
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership

UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPI	Unified Payments Interface
USA	United States of America
USDFC	United States International Development Finance Corporation
USN	United States Navy
VIF	Vivekananda International Foundation
VINBEX	Vietnam–India Bilateral Exercise
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Evolution of the Indo-Pacific Concept

Introduction: The Indo-Pacific Century

The twenty-first century has increasingly come to be recognized as the **"Indo-Pacific Century."** This characterization reflects not merely a shift in geographical emphasis but a profound transformation in the global distribution of political power, economic activity, technological innovation, and strategic competition. The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the world's most dynamic geopolitical arena, extending from the eastern coast of Africa across the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia to the western shores of the Pacific Ocean (Basrur, 2024). Home to nearly two-thirds of the world's population, more than sixty percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and several of the fastest-growing economies, the region has become the principal theatre in which the future international order is likely to be determined.

Unlike the bipolar structure that defined the Cold War or the unipolar moment that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the contemporary Indo-Pacific represents a far more complex strategic environment characterized by multiple centres of power, overlapping institutional arrangements, economic interdependence, technological rivalry, and maritime competition. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific is no longer understood merely as a geographical expression; rather, it

has evolved into a strategic construct that guides the foreign policies of major and middle powers alike.

The growing prominence of the Indo-Pacific is closely linked with several interrelated developments. Foremost among these is the remarkable rise of Asia as the engine of global economic growth. Over the past four decades, East Asia has transformed into the world's manufacturing hub, while South Asia has emerged as one of the fastest-growing markets. Simultaneously, maritime trade routes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans have become indispensable for global commerce. Nearly ninety percent of international trade by volume is transported through maritime routes, with the Indo-Pacific accommodating the busiest sea lanes in the world. Critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait collectively sustain global supply chains, energy transportation, and commercial connectivity.

The increasing dependence of the international economy on these maritime routes has elevated maritime security from a regional concern to a global strategic priority. Consequently, developments occurring in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or the Indian Ocean are no longer isolated regional events; they possess immediate consequences for international trade, global energy markets, and geopolitical stability.

Another major factor contributing to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific is the unprecedented rise of the People's Republic of China. Since initiating economic reforms in 1978, China has transformed itself into the world's second-largest economy and one of its foremost military powers. Beijing's expanding economic influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its rapid naval modernization, increasing presence in the Indian Ocean Region, and assertive posture in the South China Sea have significantly altered the regional balance of power (Mishra, 2024). These developments have prompted other regional actors—including the United States, India,

Japan, Australia, ASEAN members, and several European powers—to reassess their strategic priorities.

The Indo-Pacific has therefore become the principal arena where cooperation and competition coexist. Economic interdependence continues to deepen even as geopolitical rivalries intensify. China remains the largest trading partner for many Indo-Pacific countries while simultaneously being perceived as the primary strategic challenger by several of them. This paradox of economic integration alongside strategic mistrust constitutes one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

The conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific also signifies a departure from earlier geographical frameworks that divided Asia into separate strategic subregions. During much of the twentieth century, scholars and policymakers generally viewed South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific as distinct geopolitical theatres with relatively independent security dynamics. Such compartmentalization no longer reflects contemporary realities. Today, developments in one maritime theatre rapidly influence security, trade, diplomacy, and strategic calculations across the broader region. Chinese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean affect Japanese security calculations; maritime disputes in the South China Sea influence India's naval strategy; instability in the Persian Gulf directly impacts East Asian energy security. These interconnections have rendered the traditional Asia-Pacific framework increasingly inadequate.

The Indo-Pacific concept recognizes this integrated strategic space by emphasizing the indivisibility of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Rather than treating these maritime regions separately, it acknowledges that they constitute a single interconnected geopolitical system linked through commerce, security, infrastructure, technology, and diplomacy. This reconceptualization has fundamentally transformed strategic thinking across the world.

The intellectual evolution of the Indo-Pacific idea predates its widespread political adoption. Early references to a unified Indo-

Pacific space can be found in the writings of German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer during the interwar period (Pardesi, 2019). Although his conceptualization emerged within a very different geopolitical context, it introduced the possibility of understanding the Indian and Pacific Oceans as interconnected strategic domains. However, the modern articulation of the Indo-Pacific owes far more to contemporary geopolitical realities than to historical precedents.

A major turning point occurred in August 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered his landmark address to the Indian Parliament titled **"Confluence of the Two Seas."** Abe envisioned a broader strategic community linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans through shared democratic values, maritime cooperation, freedom of navigation, and economic prosperity. His speech marked the first coherent political articulation of what later evolved into the Indo-Pacific framework. Importantly, Abe's vision recognized India's central geographical location and strategic significance, thereby elevating India from a predominantly South Asian power to a key Indo-Pacific actor.

During the following decade, the Indo-Pacific concept gradually gained acceptance among regional powers. Australia incorporated the term into its defence and foreign policy documents, emphasizing the strategic interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The United States formally adopted the concept through its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy in February 2018 under Trump administration, recognizing India as an indispensable strategic partner in maintaining regional stability. ASEAN, initially cautious due to concerns regarding bloc politics, eventually endorsed the concept through the **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**, while emphasizing inclusivity, dialogue, and ASEAN centrality.

India's acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept represented one of the most significant shifts in its post-Cold War foreign policy. Following economic liberalization in 1991, India's strategic engagement gradually expanded beyond South Asia. The "Look East Policy,"

initiated under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, sought stronger economic engagement with Southeast Asia. This approach evolved into the more proactive "Act East Policy" after 2014, emphasizing economic integration, strategic partnerships, maritime cooperation, and regional connectivity.

India's growing participation in multilateral institutions such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the East Asia Summit, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reflects this broader strategic transformation. India's foreign policy increasingly recognizes that national security, economic growth, maritime interests, and technological advancement are deeply intertwined with developments across the Indo-Pacific.

However, the Indo-Pacific should not be viewed solely through the lens of strategic rivalry. It is equally a region of immense opportunity. The Indo-Pacific contains some of the world's largest consumer markets, major manufacturing centres, leading technological innovators, abundant natural resources, and rapidly expanding digital economies. Regional initiatives promoting connectivity, sustainable development, blue economy cooperation, renewable energy, disaster resilience, and digital governance have broadened the agenda beyond traditional military security.

At the same time, the region confronts numerous transnational challenges that require collective responses. Climate change threatens low-lying island nations and coastal megacities. Illegal fishing, maritime piracy, terrorism, cyber insecurity, pandemics, humanitarian crises, and disruptions to global supply chains increasingly transcend national boundaries (Khanna, 2023). These challenges cannot be effectively managed through unilateral action alone, thereby enhancing the importance of regional institutions and cooperative security mechanisms.

The Indo-Pacific is therefore characterized by a paradoxical coexistence of cooperation and competition. States simultaneously

pursue economic integration while strengthening military capabilities. They deepen strategic partnerships without abandoning diplomatic engagement. They seek to preserve national autonomy while participating in increasingly dense networks of regional cooperation. This complexity distinguishes the Indo-Pacific from previous geopolitical theatres and demands new analytical frameworks capable of explaining multiple, overlapping dimensions of international relations.

For India, the Indo-Pacific represents far more than a foreign policy slogan. It constitutes the principal strategic environment within which India's aspirations for economic development, regional leadership, maritime security, and global influence will unfold during the twenty-first century. India's geographic location astride major sea lines of communication, its democratic political system, expanding economy, growing naval capabilities, and long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy collectively position it as one of the indispensable stakeholders in shaping the future regional order.

The significance of the Indo-Pacific thus lies not only in its material attributes but also in its normative implications. Competing powers seek to define the principles governing regional order—whether based on freedom of navigation, sovereignty, international law, economic openness, strategic inclusivity, or spheres of influence. The contestation over these principles reflects broader debates regarding the future structure of the international system itself.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept and analyses India's emerging role within this rapidly transforming strategic landscape. By exploring the historical evolution of the concept, its competing interpretations, its geopolitical significance, and India's evolving strategic response, this chapter establishes the conceptual and analytical foundation for understanding India's Indo-Pacific policy in the twenty-first century.

Evolution of the Indo-Pacific Concept: From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the dominant strategic framework marks one of the most significant conceptual transformations in contemporary international relations. Although geographical realities remain constant, the manner in which policymakers and scholars conceptualize regions profoundly shapes strategic priorities, diplomatic alignments, and institutional architecture (He, 2022). The transition from the traditional "Asia-Pacific" framework to the broader "Indo-Pacific" reflects changing patterns of economic interdependence, maritime connectivity, power distribution, and strategic competition.

For much of the post-Second World War era, the term "Asia-Pacific" dominated academic scholarship and strategic discourse. This framework primarily emphasized East Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Pacific Ocean, with the United States serving as the principal external security provider. Institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and various U.S.-led alliance systems emerged within this geopolitical understanding.

The Asia-Pacific framework was largely a product of Cold War realities. It reflected the strategic priorities of containing communism, maintaining American military presence in East Asia, promoting export-oriented economic development, and preserving maritime stability across the Pacific. India and the broader Indian Ocean region occupied only a peripheral position within this conceptualization. Despite India's demographic size, civilizational significance, and strategic geography, it remained largely confined to South Asian studies rather than being considered an integral part of broader Asian security architecture.

Several developments gradually exposed the limitations of this traditional framework. The rapid globalization of trade, expansion of maritime commerce, increasing dependence on energy transportation

through the Indian Ocean, and the rise of China fundamentally altered regional dynamics. Simultaneously, India's economic liberalization, growing naval capabilities, and expanding engagement with Southeast Asia increasingly blurred the distinction between South Asia and East Asia.

The Indian Ocean emerged as an indispensable corridor connecting the energy-rich Middle East and Africa with the manufacturing economies of East Asia. The Strait of Malacca, through which a substantial proportion of global trade and energy shipments passes annually, became one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime chokepoints. Consequently, developments in the Indian Ocean acquired direct implications for East Asian prosperity and global economic stability.

This growing interdependence challenged the analytical adequacy of the Asia-Pacific framework. The recognition that security, trade, infrastructure, and strategic competition increasingly transcended traditional regional boundaries encouraged scholars and policymakers to conceptualize a single integrated maritime region linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The modern Indo-Pacific framework therefore represents not merely a change in geographical terminology but a recognition of profound structural changes in international politics. It acknowledges that economic prosperity, maritime security, technological competition, and geopolitical rivalry are now inseparably connected across this vast maritime domain.

Early Intellectual Origins of the Indo-Pacific Idea

The notion of linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic space is not entirely new. One of the earliest references appeared in the writings of the German geopolitical scholar **Karl Haushofer** during the interwar period. Haushofer used the expression *Indopazifischen Raum* (Indo-Pacific Space) while discussing the strategic importance of maritime Asia and the potential for cooperation

among Asian civilizations against Western colonial dominance. His interpretation, however, was primarily influenced by the geopolitical thinking of the early twentieth century and remained largely theoretical.

Although Haushofer's writings introduced the possibility of viewing the Indian and Pacific Oceans as interconnected, they did not significantly influence post-war international politics. The devastation of the Second World War, the emergence of the Cold War, and the bipolar international order shifted strategic attention toward ideological competition rather than regional integration. Consequently, the concept of the Indo-Pacific remained dormant for several decades.

During the Cold War, strategic discourse was overwhelmingly dominated by the Asia-Pacific framework. The United States established extensive alliance systems in East Asia through bilateral security arrangements with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Simultaneously, regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) focused primarily on the Pacific Ocean. India, constrained by economic limitations and committed to the policy of non-alignment, remained largely outside these institutional arrangements despite its strategic location.

Nevertheless, important structural changes were gradually taking place beneath the surface. International maritime commerce increasingly relied upon uninterrupted connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Energy exports from the Persian Gulf flowed through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca toward East Asian economies. Global manufacturing networks expanded across Southeast Asia, while technological innovation transformed maritime transportation into the backbone of globalization. These developments steadily strengthened the functional integration of the two oceans long before policymakers formally acknowledged their strategic unity.

The Rise of Maritime Asia

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of Asia. Economic globalization accelerated regional integration, while China's spectacular economic rise transformed the balance of power. Between the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, Asia became the principal engine of global economic growth. Manufacturing shifted toward East Asia, financial investment expanded across Southeast Asia, and India's economic liberalization integrated South Asia more closely with regional markets.

Simultaneously, maritime trade acquired unprecedented strategic significance. Nearly ninety percent of global trade by volume began moving through sea routes, with the Indo-Pacific accommodating the busiest shipping corridors in the world. The Indian Ocean emerged as the principal artery connecting the energy-producing regions of West Asia and Africa with the industrial economies of East Asia. The security of these maritime routes became indispensable for global economic stability.

This transformation fundamentally challenged earlier geopolitical assumptions. Security developments in the South China Sea increasingly affected Indian Ocean stability, while Chinese naval deployments in the Indian Ocean influenced Japanese and Australian strategic planning. Similarly, piracy off the Horn of Africa, terrorism in Southeast Asia, and disruptions in global supply chains demonstrated that traditional regional boundaries no longer corresponded to contemporary strategic realities.

Consequently, scholars and policymakers increasingly recognized that the Asia-Pacific framework had become analytically insufficient. A broader geographical construct capable of encompassing both oceans was required to explain the interconnected nature of economic, political, and security developments. The Indo-Pacific concept gradually emerged as the most appropriate framework for capturing these new realities.

Shinzo Abe and the Political Birth of the Indo-Pacific

Although the idea of connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans had earlier intellectual precedents, the modern political articulation of the Indo-Pacific is widely attributed to former Japanese Prime Minister **Shinzo Abe**. His address to the Indian Parliament on **22 August 2007**, titled "**Confluence of the Two Seas**," is generally regarded as the defining moment in the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Drawing inspiration from the seventeenth-century Mughal scholar Dara Shikoh, Abe argued that the Pacific and Indian Oceans had become "seas of freedom and prosperity" whose futures were increasingly intertwined. He proposed the emergence of a "broader Asia" based on democratic values, freedom of navigation, economic openness, and respect for international law.

Abe's vision represented a significant departure from the traditional Asia-Pacific framework in several respects. First, it explicitly acknowledged India's strategic importance as a major maritime power located at the centre of the Indian Ocean. Second, it emphasized maritime connectivity rather than continental divisions. Third, it proposed closer cooperation among democratic maritime powers, including Japan, India, Australia, and the United States, without explicitly identifying China as an adversary.

This formulation resonated strongly with Indian strategic thinkers who had long argued that India's geography naturally positioned it at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Abe's speech therefore provided both intellectual legitimacy and diplomatic momentum to India's expanding regional engagement.

Australia's Contribution to Indo-Pacific Thinking

Australia played an equally important role in institutionalizing the Indo-Pacific concept. Owing to its unique geographical position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australian policymakers increasingly recognized that national security could no longer be understood solely through the Pacific perspective.

Beginning with the **2009 Defence White Paper**, and more explicitly in the **2013 Australian Defence White Paper**, Australia officially adopted the Indo-Pacific terminology. Australian strategic documents argued that the economic and security futures of the Indian and Pacific Oceans had become inseparable due to growing trade flows, naval modernization, and strategic competition.

Australian scholars such as Rory Medcalf significantly contributed to the intellectual development of Indo-Pacific studies. Medcalf argued that the Indo-Pacific was not merely a geographical label but a strategic system characterized by interconnected maritime security, economic interdependence, and multipolar power distribution. His work helped popularize the concept within academic and policy communities across the world.

Australia's support also reflected practical considerations. Its economic prosperity depended heavily on maritime trade with East Asia, while its energy security and regional stability increasingly relied upon developments in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, Australia became one of the earliest proponents of an integrated Indo-Pacific strategy.

The United States and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific concept acquired global prominence only after its formal adoption by the United States. Although the Obama Administration initially emphasized the "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalance to Asia," it largely continued using the Asia-Pacific terminology. Nevertheless, growing Chinese military modernization, expanding naval deployments, and increasing tensions in the South China Sea gradually encouraged American policymakers to adopt a broader strategic framework.

In 2017, the administration of President Donald Trump formally introduced the **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)** strategy. The FOIP emphasized four interconnected principles:

- Freedom of navigation and overflight.

- Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- Promotion of transparent, sustainable, and market-oriented economic development.

The FOIP recognized India as an indispensable strategic partner and elevated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to greater prominence. Rather than relying solely on bilateral alliances, the United States increasingly sought to strengthen networks of cooperation among democratic maritime powers capable of preserving a stable balance of power in the region.

The Biden Administration largely retained the Indo-Pacific framework while expanding its agenda to include climate resilience, critical technologies, supply-chain security, digital infrastructure, public health, and sustainable development. This continuity demonstrated that the Indo-Pacific had evolved beyond partisan policy preferences to become the central organizing principle of American strategy in Asia.

ASEAN's Inclusive Interpretation

The rapid acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept by major powers initially generated concern within ASEAN. Many Southeast Asian states feared that the emerging framework could intensify strategic rivalry between the United States and China, thereby undermining ASEAN's long-standing principle of centrality in regional affairs.

Recognizing these concerns, ASEAN adopted the **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)** in 2019. Unlike the more security-oriented approaches of other powers, AOIP emphasized inclusivity, dialogue, openness, economic cooperation, sustainable development, and respect for international law.

Importantly, ASEAN rejected the notion of exclusive geopolitical blocs. Instead, it envisioned the Indo-Pacific as a cooperative regional

framework in which all countries—including China—could participate constructively. This interpretation reflected ASEAN's longstanding diplomatic philosophy of maintaining strategic equilibrium among competing major powers while preserving regional autonomy.

AOIP therefore introduced an important normative dimension into Indo-Pacific discourse by emphasizing that strategic competition should not undermine regional cooperation or economic integration.

India's Interpretation of the Indo-Pacific

India's understanding of the Indo-Pacific differs significantly from that of several other major powers. While recognizing the challenges posed by China's expanding influence, India consistently emphasizes that the Indo-Pacific should remain **free, open, inclusive, and rules-based** rather than becoming an instrument of containment.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated India's comprehensive Indo-Pacific vision during his keynote address at the **Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018**. He argued that the Indo-Pacific was neither a limited strategy nor a military alliance but a natural geographical region based upon shared prosperity, connectivity, international law, freedom of navigation, and ASEAN centrality.

India's Indo-Pacific vision rests upon several fundamental principles:

- Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce.
- Peaceful settlement of disputes.
- ASEAN centrality.
- Inclusive regional cooperation.
- Sustainable and transparent connectivity.
- Strategic autonomy.

These principles demonstrate India's effort to balance closer strategic cooperation with democratic partners while avoiding rigid alliance politics.

India further operationalized its vision through the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**, launched in 2019. IPOI broadened the Indo-Pacific agenda beyond traditional security by focusing on seven pillars: maritime security, marine ecology, maritime resources, disaster risk reduction, capacity building, science and technology cooperation, and trade connectivity.

The initiative reflects India's belief that regional stability requires cooperation across economic, environmental, technological, and humanitarian domains rather than military competition alone.

The Indo-Pacific as a Strategic Construct

Today, the Indo-Pacific has evolved far beyond its origins as a geographical expression. It has become a comprehensive strategic construct that shapes national security policies, diplomatic alignments, economic partnerships, and institutional innovation.

Unlike the Asia-Pacific framework, which largely reflected American dominance during the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific recognizes the emergence of a more multipolar regional order. It accommodates the growing importance of India, acknowledges China's expanding influence, incorporates the strategic interests of Australia and ASEAN, and recognizes the increasing interconnectedness of maritime security, economic development, and technological competition.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific remains a contested concept. Different actors continue to interpret its objectives in different ways. For some, it represents a framework for preserving a rules-based international order; for others, it serves as a mechanism for balancing China's rise; while still others regard it as an inclusive platform for regional cooperation and sustainable development.

Despite these differences, there is broad consensus that the Indo-Pacific has become the principal geopolitical theatre of the twenty-first

century. It is within this evolving strategic environment that India's foreign policy, maritime strategy, economic diplomacy, and regional partnerships must be understood.

Accordingly, the next section examines the geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific by analysing its maritime geography, economic centrality, security architecture, technological transformation, and emerging non-traditional security challenges. These dimensions collectively explain why the Indo-Pacific occupies such a central position in contemporary international politics and why it has become indispensable to India's strategic future.

Geostrategic Importance of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the world's most strategically significant geopolitical region because it simultaneously serves as the centre of global economic activity, maritime commerce, technological innovation, and military competition. Unlike previous geopolitical theatres that were defined primarily by ideological rivalry or territorial disputes, the Indo-Pacific represents a multidimensional strategic space where economic interdependence coexists with geopolitical competition. The region encompasses the world's busiest sea lanes, fastest-growing economies, largest energy transportation routes, and increasingly sophisticated security architecture. Consequently, developments occurring within the Indo-Pacific have profound implications not only for regional stability but also for the future international order.

The strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific may be understood through five interrelated dimensions: maritime geography, economic significance, security architecture, technological and geoeconomic competition, and emerging non-traditional security challenges. Together, these dimensions explain why the Indo-Pacific has become the principal focus of contemporary international relations and why India has accorded unprecedented importance to this region in its foreign and security policies.

Maritime Geography: The Foundation of Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

Geography has historically shaped the strategic behaviour of states, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Indo-Pacific. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, the Indo-Pacific covers two major oceans and several semi-enclosed seas that connect Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. It includes some of the world's most strategically important maritime chokepoints, through which enormous volumes of international trade and energy supplies pass every day.

Among these chokepoints, the **Strait of Malacca** occupies exceptional strategic significance. Connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, it serves as the shortest maritime route between Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Approximately one-fourth of global traded goods and a substantial proportion of East Asia's imported oil transit through this narrow passage annually. Any disruption in the Strait of Malacca would immediately affect global energy markets, manufacturing supply chains, and international commerce.

Similarly, the **Strait of Hormuz** remains indispensable for global energy security. A considerable share of the world's crude oil exports passes through this narrow waterway connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea. Likewise, the **Bab-el-Mandeb Strait**, linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, plays a critical role in connecting Europe with Asia through the Suez Canal. Together, these maritime corridors form an integrated network upon which the global economy depends.

The strategic value of maritime geography has become increasingly evident in recent years due to disruptions caused by piracy, regional conflicts, pandemics, and supply-chain crises. The temporary blockage of the Suez Canal by the *Ever Given* in 2021 highlighted the vulnerability of global trade to maritime disruptions. Likewise, attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea have reinforced the importance

of securing Indo-Pacific sea lanes against both conventional and non-conventional threats.

Unlike continental powers whose strategic concerns are primarily land-based, maritime powers derive security and prosperity from maintaining freedom of navigation and uninterrupted maritime commerce. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific has become the primary arena for naval modernization, maritime surveillance, submarine deployments, and strategic port development.

For India, maritime geography constitutes one of its greatest strategic advantages. Situated at the centre of the Indian Ocean, India occupies a commanding position astride major Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Nearly all maritime traffic connecting Europe, Africa, and the Middle East with East Asia passes close to the Indian coastline. India's extensive coastline of over **11,099 kilometres**, together with the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands** and **Lakshadweep**, provides natural opportunities for maritime surveillance, logistics, and power projection.

The Andaman and Nicobar Command, located near the western entrance of the Strait of Malacca, possesses enormous strategic significance. It enables India to monitor one of the world's busiest shipping routes and enhances maritime domain awareness across the eastern Indian Ocean. This geographic advantage has become increasingly valuable amid growing strategic competition between major powers.

Economic Significance of the Indo-Pacific

Beyond geography, the Indo-Pacific has become the centre of global economic activity. The region contributes nearly sixty percent of global GDP and accounts for the majority of international trade and manufacturing output. Several of the world's largest economies—including the United States, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, and Indonesia—are located within the Indo-Pacific.

The extraordinary economic transformation of East and Southeast Asia over the past four decades has fundamentally altered the global economic landscape. China has emerged as the world's manufacturing hub, Japan remains a technological leader, South Korea dominates advanced electronics and semiconductors, while India has established itself as a major centre for information technology, digital services, and pharmaceuticals. ASEAN economies have become integral components of global production networks, attracting investment from multinational corporations seeking diversified manufacturing bases.

The Indo-Pacific also contains some of the world's most dynamic consumer markets. Rapid urbanization, demographic growth, rising incomes, and expanding middle classes have transformed regional demand for infrastructure, digital technologies, healthcare, education, and consumer goods. These developments have made the Indo-Pacific an indispensable destination for global investment.

An equally important dimension of regional economic significance lies in global supply chains. Contemporary manufacturing depends upon complex production networks spanning multiple countries. Raw materials extracted in Australia or Africa may be processed in Southeast Asia, assembled in China or Vietnam, and marketed in Europe or North America. Such interconnected production systems rely heavily upon uninterrupted maritime transportation across the Indo-Pacific.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities within these global supply chains. Factory shutdowns, port congestion, shortages of semiconductor chips, and disruptions in shipping highlighted excessive dependence upon limited manufacturing centres. Consequently, many countries have begun promoting supply-chain diversification, resilience, and "friend-shoring" through cooperation with trusted strategic partners. The Indo-Pacific has therefore become central to emerging debates concerning economic security alongside economic globalization.

India has actively sought to benefit from these structural changes. Through initiatives such as **Make in India**, **Production Linked Incentive (PLI)** schemes, the **National Logistics Policy**, and investments in digital infrastructure, India aims to integrate more deeply into regional and global value chains. Simultaneously, India seeks to attract multinational corporations relocating manufacturing facilities as part of broader supply-chain diversification strategies.

Energy security further enhances the Indo-Pacific's economic importance. Most East Asian economies remain heavily dependent upon imported oil and liquefied natural gas transported through the Indian Ocean. Any disruption in maritime energy transportation could have immediate consequences for industrial production, inflation, and economic growth across the region.

For India, whose energy imports account for a significant proportion of domestic consumption, ensuring secure maritime energy routes constitutes a vital national interest. This dependence reinforces the strategic importance of maintaining peace, stability, and freedom of navigation throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Security Architecture and Strategic Competition

While economic interdependence remains a defining feature of the Indo-Pacific, it coexists with intensifying geopolitical competition. The region has witnessed rapid military modernization, expanding naval deployments, increasing defence expenditure, and the emergence of new strategic partnerships. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific has become the principal theatre of contemporary great-power competition.

The most significant driver of this transformation has been China's rise. Over the past two decades, China has undertaken one of the most extensive military modernization programmes in modern history. Its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has expanded dramatically in terms of surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers, and long-range missile capabilities. Simultaneously, Beijing has strengthened its

military presence in the South China Sea through artificial island construction, airfields, naval facilities, and advanced surveillance systems.

China's expanding presence extends beyond the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean Region. Investments in ports and infrastructure across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Djibouti, and East Africa have generated widespread debate regarding the strategic implications of the so-called "String of Pearls." Although China characterizes these projects primarily as commercial initiatives, several regional states perceive them as facilitating future military logistics and naval access.

In response, major regional powers have strengthened security cooperation through both bilateral and minilateral arrangements. The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)**—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—has evolved into one of the most prominent platforms for strategic consultation on maritime security, infrastructure, cybersecurity, critical technologies, and disaster response. Although the Quad is not a formal military alliance, its activities reflect growing convergence among democratic maritime powers.

Similarly, the **AUKUS** partnership involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States represents another significant development in regional security architecture. By facilitating Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and advanced defence technologies, AUKUS seeks to strengthen deterrence and preserve the regional balance of power.

At the same time, ASEAN-led institutions—including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus—continue to provide inclusive platforms for dialogue and confidence-building. Their emphasis on consultation, consensus, and peaceful dispute resolution complements rather than replaces emerging minilateral arrangements.

India's security strategy within this evolving architecture reflects a careful balance between strategic autonomy and strategic partnerships. Rather than joining formal military alliances, India has expanded defence cooperation with multiple partners while preserving independent decision-making. Bilateral logistics agreements with the United States, France, Australia, Japan, Singapore, and other countries have significantly enhanced India's operational reach across the Indo-Pacific.

India's **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** doctrine further underscores its aspiration to function as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. Through humanitarian assistance, disaster relief operations, maritime surveillance, anti-piracy patrols, and capacity building for smaller island states, India seeks to contribute to regional stability while reinforcing its own strategic influence.

Technology, Geoeconomics, and Strategic Competition

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific increasingly extends beyond traditional military competition into emerging domains of technology, innovation, and geoeconomics. In the twenty-first century, technological leadership has become inseparable from national power. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber capabilities, semiconductors, biotechnology, space technology, and digital infrastructure now influence both economic competitiveness and military effectiveness.

Control over semiconductor production illustrates this transformation. Advanced semiconductor manufacturing is concentrated within a small number of Indo-Pacific economies, particularly Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Disruptions affecting these supply chains could severely impact industries ranging from automobiles and telecommunications to defence production.

Similarly, digital infrastructure has become an arena of strategic competition. Competing approaches toward 5G telecommunications,

undersea internet cables, cloud computing, cybersecurity standards, and digital governance increasingly shape regional alignments. Technology partnerships now complement traditional defence cooperation as states seek to reduce vulnerabilities arising from excessive dependence on any single supplier.

The concept of **geoeconomics** has therefore assumed growing importance within Indo-Pacific strategy. States increasingly employ trade, investment, infrastructure finance, technological standards, export controls, and economic sanctions as instruments of strategic influence. Economic policies are no longer viewed solely through commercial perspectives but are increasingly integrated into broader national security strategies.

For India, technological self-reliance and economic resilience have become central components of national strategy. Initiatives promoting indigenous defence production, semiconductor manufacturing, digital public infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems seek to strengthen India's long-term strategic autonomy within an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific environment.

Climate Change, Environmental Security, and the Blue Economy

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific extends well beyond conventional military and economic considerations. In the twenty-first century, environmental degradation, climate change, marine resource depletion, and natural disasters have emerged as critical security concerns. These non-traditional challenges transcend national boundaries and demand cooperative responses involving governments, regional organizations, international institutions, and civil society. Consequently, environmental security has become an integral component of Indo-Pacific strategic discourse.

The Indo-Pacific is particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels threaten the territorial integrity and livelihoods of small island developing states such as the Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and several Pacific Island nations. Increased

frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones, floods, droughts, and coastal erosion pose serious challenges to food security, infrastructure, public health, and economic development. These environmental disruptions also have significant geopolitical implications, as they contribute to forced migration, humanitarian crises, and competition over diminishing natural resources.

The Indian Ocean has witnessed a noticeable increase in the frequency of extreme weather events during the past two decades. Cyclones affecting India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Mozambique, and other littoral states have caused widespread destruction of lives and infrastructure. Similarly, countries in the Pacific Ocean face growing existential threats from rising sea levels that endanger freshwater supplies, agricultural productivity, and coastal settlements. Such developments highlight that environmental sustainability is no longer merely a developmental issue but has become an essential dimension of national and regional security.

Marine pollution constitutes another major environmental challenge within the Indo-Pacific. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and expanding maritime activities have significantly increased plastic pollution, chemical contamination, and oil spills in regional waters. These environmental problems threaten marine biodiversity, fisheries, tourism, and the livelihoods of millions of coastal communities. Illegal disposal of hazardous waste and excessive exploitation of marine resources further exacerbate ecological degradation, undermining long-term economic sustainability.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing has emerged as one of the most pressing maritime governance issues in the Indo-Pacific. Many coastal states lack adequate surveillance capabilities to monitor their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), allowing foreign fishing vessels to exploit marine resources illegally. Such activities not only result in substantial economic losses but also create diplomatic tensions and undermine food security for coastal populations dependent upon fisheries.

Recognizing these challenges, the concept of the **Blue Economy** has gained increasing prominence in regional policy discussions (Mukherjee, 2019). The Blue Economy advocates the sustainable utilization of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and environmental conservation. Unlike traditional models of resource exploitation, the Blue Economy emphasizes balancing economic development with ecological sustainability. It encompasses fisheries, maritime transport, renewable ocean energy, marine biotechnology, coastal tourism, seabed resource management, and conservation of marine ecosystems.

For India, the Blue Economy represents a vital component of its maritime strategy. With a coastline extending over 7,500 kilometres and an Exclusive Economic Zone covering more than two million square kilometres, India possesses significant marine resources capable of supporting long-term economic growth. Government initiatives promoting port-led development, sustainable fisheries, offshore renewable energy, marine scientific research, and coastal community development reflect India's commitment to harnessing the economic potential of its maritime domain while ensuring environmental sustainability.

India has also actively participated in international efforts to strengthen marine conservation through cooperation with the **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**, the **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**, and the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**. These frameworks encourage collaborative approaches to marine ecology, sustainable fisheries, maritime safety, scientific research, and capacity building among Indo-Pacific states.

Environmental cooperation has thus become an important confidence-building measure in a region often characterized by geopolitical rivalry. Unlike traditional security issues, climate change and environmental degradation create shared vulnerabilities that encourage cooperation even among strategic competitors. Consequently, environmental diplomacy increasingly complements

conventional security arrangements in shaping the future Indo-Pacific order.

Maritime Governance and the Rules-Based Order

A defining characteristic of the Indo-Pacific is its dependence on open, secure, and legally governed maritime spaces. Since the overwhelming majority of regional trade, energy transportation, and commercial connectivity occurs through the sea, maintaining an effective framework for maritime governance has become indispensable for regional stability.

Central to this governance framework is the principle of a **rules-based international order**, which emphasizes adherence to international law, peaceful dispute settlement, freedom of navigation, and respect for sovereign rights. The **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (1982)** serves as the primary legal framework governing maritime rights and responsibilities. It defines territorial waters, contiguous zones, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), continental shelf rights, and mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution.

Most Indo-Pacific states regard UNCLOS as the cornerstone of regional maritime governance. The convention provides legal certainty for navigation, resource exploration, marine scientific research, and environmental protection. At a time when overlapping territorial claims have intensified regional tensions, adherence to international law has become increasingly important for preserving maritime stability.

Nevertheless, several maritime disputes continue to challenge regional governance. The South China Sea remains one of the most contested maritime spaces in the world. Competing territorial claims involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan have generated frequent diplomatic and military confrontations. China's construction of artificial islands, deployment of military infrastructure,

and expansive interpretation of historical claims have raised concerns regarding freedom of navigation and regional security.

Similarly, disputes in the East China Sea involving China and Japan illustrate the strategic importance of maritime boundaries in contemporary geopolitics. These disputes are not merely territorial disagreements; they involve access to fisheries, energy resources, strategic sea lanes, and national prestige.

India has consistently supported peaceful dispute resolution based upon international law and respect for UNCLOS. While India is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes, it has repeatedly emphasized the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation, unimpeded lawful commerce, and adherence to international legal norms. This position reflects India's broader commitment to preserving an open and stable maritime order that benefits all regional stakeholders.

Maritime governance also encompasses cooperation against transnational maritime threats such as piracy, terrorism, trafficking of narcotics and arms, human smuggling, and cyberattacks targeting port infrastructure. International naval cooperation has significantly improved maritime security through coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and capacity-building programmes.

India has emerged as an active contributor to these efforts. The Indian Navy regularly conducts anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, provides humanitarian assistance during natural disasters, and participates in multinational naval exercises such as **MALABAR**, **MILAN**, and **RIMPAC**. These activities reinforce India's image as a responsible maritime power committed to preserving regional stability.

Human Security and Humanitarian Assistance

The strategic discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific has increasingly expanded beyond traditional notions of state security to encompass the broader concept of **human security**. This approach recognizes that the well-being of individuals and communities is fundamental to long-

term peace and stability. Human security includes protection from natural disasters, pandemics, food insecurity, health crises, environmental degradation, and humanitarian emergencies.

The Indo-Pacific is among the world's most disaster-prone regions. Earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, floods, and droughts regularly affect millions of people. The devastating **Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004** demonstrated the need for rapid multinational cooperation in disaster response. The coordinated humanitarian assistance provided by India, the United States, Japan, and Australia during this crisis subsequently contributed to the emergence of deeper strategic cooperation among these countries.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the interconnected nature of regional security. Supply-chain disruptions, shortages of medical equipment, vaccine distribution, and public health cooperation became critical components of Indo-Pacific diplomacy. Governments increasingly recognized that biological threats can have consequences comparable to conventional military conflicts in terms of economic disruption and human suffering.

India has actively contributed to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations across the Indo-Pacific. Whether responding to cyclones in Mozambique, earthquakes in Nepal, humanitarian crises in Sri Lanka, or natural disasters affecting Pacific Island states, India has consistently employed its naval and air capabilities to deliver emergency assistance. Operations such as **Operation Maitri**, **Operation Rahat**, and **Vaccine Maitri** illustrate India's commitment to humanitarian diplomacy.

Such initiatives strengthen India's regional credibility by demonstrating that military capabilities can serve broader humanitarian objectives. They also reinforce India's aspiration to function as a **net security provider** in the Indian Ocean Region through cooperation rather than coercion.

India's Comprehensive Maritime Strategy

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific has evolved from a predominantly continental security perspective toward a more balanced maritime strategy. Historically, India's strategic attention focused largely on land borders with Pakistan and China. However, globalization, maritime commerce, and China's growing naval presence have elevated the Indian Ocean to the centre of India's strategic calculations.

India's contemporary maritime strategy rests upon several mutually reinforcing pillars.

First, **maritime security** remains fundamental. The modernization of the Indian Navy, expansion of naval infrastructure, development of aircraft carriers, submarines, maritime surveillance systems, and coastal security mechanisms reflects India's determination to safeguard its maritime interests.

Second, **regional partnerships** have become increasingly important. India has strengthened defence and security cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, France, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and numerous Indian Ocean island states. These partnerships enhance interoperability, intelligence sharing, logistics support, and maritime domain awareness while preserving India's strategic autonomy.

Third, **connectivity and economic diplomacy** occupy a central place in India's Indo-Pacific policy. Initiatives such as the **Sagarmala Programme**, development of transnational transport corridors, digital connectivity projects, and investments in port infrastructure seek to enhance regional integration and facilitate economic growth.

Fourth, India emphasizes **inclusive multilateralism**. Rather than promoting exclusive military alliances, India supports regional institutions including ASEAN, BIMSTEC, IORA, the East Asia Summit, and the Quad as complementary mechanisms for addressing diverse regional challenges.

Finally, India's maritime strategy incorporates a strong normative dimension. Through doctrines such as **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** and the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**, India advocates an Indo-Pacific characterized by openness, inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, sustainable development, and international law. These principles distinguish India's approach from purely power-centric interpretations of regional strategy.

Conclusion: The Strategic Centrality of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific has become the defining geopolitical region of the twenty-first century because it integrates the principal drivers of contemporary international politics: maritime geography, economic dynamism, strategic competition, technological transformation, and environmental sustainability. No other region simultaneously accommodates such extensive commercial activity, diverse political systems, competing strategic interests, and critical global commons.

The Indo-Pacific is neither solely a theatre of rivalry nor merely a zone of economic cooperation. Rather, it represents a complex strategic ecosystem in which cooperation and competition coexist. States seek economic integration while enhancing military preparedness; they advocate international law while pursuing national interests; and they deepen strategic partnerships without abandoning diplomatic engagement. This multidimensional character requires analytical approaches capable of transcending simplistic assumptions of conflict or cooperation.

For India, the Indo-Pacific is not simply an external strategic construct but the principal arena in which its aspirations for economic development, maritime leadership, technological advancement, and global influence will increasingly be realized. India's geographical location, democratic institutions, expanding economy, and growing naval capabilities provide it with unique opportunities to shape the evolving regional order.

Understanding this strategic importance is therefore essential before examining the competing ideas regarding how the Indo-Pacific should be organized. The following section analyses the **different visions advanced by the United States, China, Japan, ASEAN, Australia, and India**, highlighting the ideological, strategic, and institutional contestation that continues to define the future of the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Chapter-2

Indo-Pacific: Theoretical Paradigm

INTRODUCTION

The evolving geo-strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly recognized as central to global power dynamics. Region has vast maritime expanse, extending from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific, and critically assesses its implications through the lens of prominent International Relations (IR) theories. A consistent focus is maintained on India's national interests, strategic calculus, and policy responses within this dynamic environment. The objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how theoretical paradigms illuminate India's role and challenges in the Indo-Pacific, contributing to a nuanced appreciation of its complex geopolitical significance.

THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A GEOSTRATEGIC CONSTRUCT

The conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific as a unified strategic theatre marks a significant shift in contemporary geopolitical discourse. This section traces the historical underpinnings and current drivers behind this re-framing, emphasizing its inherent strategic and economic value.

India's Centrality in the Indo-Pacific Discourse

India occupies a pivotal position within the Indo-Pacific construct, a centrality underscored by its geographical location, economic imperatives, and evolving strategic vision (Pulipaka, 2022). The

nation's development and economic growth are intrinsically linked to the stability and openness of the Indo-Pacific, as over 95% of its trade by volume and 70% by value transits through these critical sea lanes.⁸ This profound economic reliance serves as a fundamental driver for India's proactive and strategic engagement in the region, directly connecting its prosperity to maritime security.

The Indo-Pacific concept implicitly "elevates India's role" and positions it as a "natural balancer against China". India's geographical location at the midpoint of the Indian Ocean places it "at the heart of a key geostrategic and geoeconomic domain of the 21st century". This positioning is not merely geographical but reflects a recognition of India's growing capabilities and its potential to influence regional dynamics.

India's strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific has evolved significantly, notably through its "Act East Policy," which succeeded the earlier "Look East Policy." This policy has broadened its scope from primarily economic objectives to encompass security and strategic partnerships across the entire Indo-Pacific, with a key objective of preserving a favourable balance of power and addressing China's assertiveness (Amresh, 2025). Furthermore, India's maritime security vision, articulated through the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine launched in 2015, and its subsequent upgrade to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) in 2025, positions India as a "net security provider" or "preferred security partner" in the Indian Ocean Region, with an expanded scope to the wider Global South (Amresh, 2025). This indicates that India's Indo-Pacific strategy is not solely about power projection but is intrinsically linked to safeguarding its vital economic lifelines.

While India is positioned as a "natural balancer" against China and actively participates in initiatives like the Quad, it has also expressed "discomfort" with the Indo-Pacific concept being perceived solely as a containment strategy against China, emphasizing its desire to avoid

"alliances of containment". This reveals a sophisticated strategic posture, where India pursues strategic autonomy, balancing security cooperation with partners against China while maintaining diplomatic space for engagement with Beijing. This nuanced approach allows India flexibility and broadens its appeal to other regional actors who also seek to avoid choosing sides in great power rivalries.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: PARADIGMS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific can be critically examined by applying five prominent International Relations theories: Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Critical Geopolitics, and Mandala Theory. The analysis consistently prioritizes India's evolving interests, strategic calculus, and policy responses within this vital region. Each theoretical paradigm will be explored in detail, followed by a comparative analysis that highlights their interplay, strengths, and limitations in explaining India's engagement. While demonstrating that a comprehensive understanding of India's strategic approach necessitates a multi-paradigmatic perspective, ultimately advocating for an eclectic approach that synthesizes insights from diverse theoretical frameworks. The subsequent sections will systematically address each theoretical lens, providing a structured and in-depth exploration of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical complexities from an India-centric viewpoint. This foundational discussion sets the stage for a more detailed, India-centric analysis of the region's geostrategic dynamics.

Realism and the Indo-Pacific: A Balancing Act

Realism, a foundational paradigm in International Relations, offers a robust framework for understanding state behaviour in an anarchic international system, where states primarily prioritize their survival and security.

CORE TENETS OF REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Realism posits that the international system is characterized by anarchy, meaning there is no overarching authority above states. In this self-help environment, states are the primary actors and are driven by a fundamental desire for survival and security (He, 2018). This leads to a constant struggle for power and influence, where power maximization is a key objective. The balance of power is considered a "normal state behaviour," as states seek to prevent any single actor from dominating the system. Realist thought suggests that states pursue their interests pragmatically, often setting aside moral or ideological considerations in favour of strategic necessity (Kumar, 2024).

Traditional IR theory, heavily influenced by realism, has historically maintained a "terrestrial orientation," focusing on the consolidation of sovereign power over defined land territories (Acar, 2022). However, the maritime sphere, despite its profound historical importance in shaping global development and capitalism, has been "virtually absent" from mainstream IR theory.¹⁵ This presents a conceptual challenge for classical realism when analysing maritime-centric regions like the Indo-Pacific. A comprehensive realist analysis of this region must adapt to include sea power, control of ocean flows, and maritime security as central elements of state power and strategic competition. This implies that the Indo-Pacific context compels a more comprehensive understanding of power beyond traditional land-centric views, pushing the boundaries of realist application.

INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL CALCULUS THROUGH A REALIST LENS

From a realist perspective, India's strategic behaviour in the Indo-Pacific is largely driven by its pursuit of power, security, and influence in response to regional dynamics, most notably the rise of China. The Indo-Pacific concept itself is primarily understood as a "balancing strategy" against China's growing power, especially in the maritime

security domain. India is perceived as a "natural balancer" against China due to its size, geographical position, and growing capabilities.

The increasing naval presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), coupled with its significant investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in India's neighbouring countries, such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and Gwadar Port in Pakistan, are viewed with apprehension by New Delhi (Singh, 2020). These developments, alongside persistent border tensions with China, contribute to India's perception of a potential "two-front war" threat. This "two-front war" perception is a classic manifestation of a security dilemma from a realist viewpoint. China's actions, intended to enhance its own security and influence (e.g., securing supply lines via BRI), are perceived as direct threats by India, leading to reciprocal actions to bolster its own security.

India's reinforced participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the United States, Japan, and Australia is a "clear manifestation" of its underlying realist goals and principles. This engagement aligns states against the strategic threat posed by China, and India's renewed interest in the Quad is a direct response to China's advancing economic expansionism in the IOR and ongoing border standoffs. This causal chain—perceived threat leading to a security dilemma and subsequently to balancing behaviour—highlights that India's realist calculus is fundamentally driven by its immediate security environment and its long-term ambition to maintain its regional influence amidst rising Chinese power.

CHINA'S RISE AND INDIA'S BALANCING STRATEGY

China's rapid rise as a military and economic power in the Indo-Pacific directly influences India's strategic choices, compelling New Delhi to adopt balancing behaviours and actively counter Chinese influence. China possesses the world's largest navy, with 355 vessels in 2021, projected to increase to 460 by 2030, including major surface combatants, submarines, and aircraft carriers (Moon, 2023). Beijing has also made significant investments in ports across the Indian Ocean,

which are perceived as having potential military purposes, aiming to encircle neighbouring countries and control strategic choke points like the Strait of Malacca.

India has expressed "significant concern" regarding China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean and its strengthened relations with Pakistan. China's "debt-trap diplomacy" in the region, where countries accumulate significant debt to China for infrastructure projects, is also a point of unease for India and other regional actors (Doyle et al., 2019). These actions are not merely about securing economic interests but are perceived by India as a direct challenge to its traditional dominance in the Indian Ocean.

The Indo-Pacific concept itself "rescales the region to include India and strategically aligns certain regional states in an old-fashioned quasi-alliance to the strategic threat posed by China," effectively framing India as a crucial counter-balance. This creates a classic power-balancing dynamic where China's pursuit of power directly leads to India's counter-balancing efforts to maintain regional equilibrium. The Indo-Pacific, from a realist perspective, is therefore a primary arena for great power rivalry, where India and China compete not just militarily but also economically and diplomatically for influence over critical maritime spaces and regional partners.

LIBERALISM AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: FOSTERING COOPERATION AND INSTITUTIONS

Liberalism in International Relations provides an alternative lens to realism, emphasizing the potential for cooperation and peace through institutions, economic interdependence, and shared values.

CORE TENETS OF LIBERALISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM

Liberal IR theory posits that international institutions can facilitate cooperation and promote peace by providing frameworks for collective security and dispute resolution. It also highlights the role of economic interdependence, arguing that free trade and interconnectedness foster prosperity and peace by increasing the costs

of conflict and promoting mutual interests among states (Harris, 2022). This perspective distinguishes between republican liberalism (democratic peace theory), commercial liberalism (trade-brings-peace theory), and liberal institutionalism (role of international organizations).

The liberal interpretation of the Indo-Pacific aims to establish a "new institutional setting" that encourages cooperation among states across both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Shared values and norms, particularly among democracies, are seen as significant factors shaping balancing strategies against authoritarian states like the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Shaunik, 2016). Liberalism offers a normative counterpoint to realist power politics in the Indo-Pacific. The emphasis on "institutional settings" and "shared values" suggests that states are not solely driven by security dilemmas but also by the pursuit of absolute gains from cooperation (Tharoor et al., 2020). This implies that despite great power competition, there are inherent drivers for states to build common frameworks, especially for economic integration, addressing non-traditional security threats, and upholding a rules-based order. The challenge for liberalism, however, lies in explaining how cooperation can thrive amidst significant power imbalances and conflicting national interests.

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH LIBERAL ORDER AND MULTILATERALISM

India's approach to liberal principles and institutions in the Indo-Pacific reflects a nuanced strategy that balances cooperation with its emphasis on strategic autonomy. India's vision for a "Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIIP)," articulated through its SAGAR doctrine, explicitly prioritizes "inclusive multilateral cooperation" across various domains, including maritime security, economic collaboration, regional connectivity, sustainable development, and disaster relief (He, 2022).

India actively participates in regional forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting

Plus and strengthens bilateral ties with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It consistently supports ASEAN centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture and collaborates with groupings like the Quad and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). India's commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" includes adherence to international law and ensuring freedom of navigation, which are core tenets of liberal international order.

However, India's embrace of a liberal vision is described as "selectively and ambivalently" adopted, leading to a "low-resolution liberal order" with "weakly defined" normative content. India's vision for liberal order "stands apart" from the "security community" concept enunciated by other Quad partners, as it prioritizes diversity at the inter-state level and insists on "inclusive rather than exclusive order management" in the Indo-Pacific. This "low-resolution liberalism" is not a rejection but a strategic adaptation. India's emphasis on "inclusive" order management and "diversity" stems from a desire to avoid being drawn into a rigid, exclusive anti-China bloc, which aligns with its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy. This strategic choice allows India greater flexibility and broader appeal among diverse regional actors, differentiating its approach from more ideologically driven liberal powers.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIBERAL ORDER IN THE-INDO-PACIFIC

The establishment of a robust liberal order in the Indo-Pacific faces significant challenges, yet also presents numerous opportunities for cooperation. A primary obstacle is the "weak economic and institutional foundations for successful cooperation" across the two oceans (Bandyopadhyaya, 1977). The broader liberal international order is under threat from various fronts, including the rise of populist forces, great power revisionism (especially China's assertive actions), and a concerning decline in human rights and democracy in many Indo-Pacific countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. These internal

and external pressures highlight the fragility of liberal norms and institutions in the region.

Despite these challenges, opportunities for cooperation abound in areas that transcend traditional security concerns. These include collaborative efforts on Covid-19 vaccine distribution, climate change mitigation, the development of critical technologies, infrastructure development, and cyber and space governance (Acharya, 2017). India's MAHASAGAR vision, for instance, explicitly expands cooperation to the "wider Global South" to address both traditional and non-traditional security threats, promote trade, and foster sustainable development.

The Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographical space but a contested arena where the future of the liberal international order is being shaped. The "weak foundations" of liberal institutions and the "erosion of democracy" underscore the significant pressures on this order. This implies that while liberal principles offer a framework for cooperation, their successful implementation requires overcoming deep-seated geopolitical rivalries and adapting to the diverse political systems within the region. India's emphasis on inclusivity and its pragmatic approach to liberal values are critical for fostering a liberal order that can accommodate diverse state interests and remain relevant in a multipolar world.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: SHAPING IDENTITIES AND NORMS

Constructivism in International Relations emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, values, and identity in shaping state behavior and the international system. It posits that the social world is not fixed but is constructed through interactions and shared understandings among actors.

CORE TENETS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Constructivism fundamentally argues that the international system is not solely shaped by material forces like power distribution (as realists contend) or economic interdependence (as liberals emphasize), but also by social constructs such as ideas, norms, values, and identities. These ideational factors influence how states perceive their interests, define their roles, and interact with one another. Unlike objective material realities, social constructs are intersubjective, meaning they exist because actors collectively believe in them and act accordingly. For constructivists, regions themselves are not natural geographical entities but are "social constructs" or "ideational constructs" that are "willed into existence" by political actors and their shared understandings.

This perspective highlights that the "Indo-Pacific" concept is more than a geographical descriptor; it is an "ideational construct" for promoting value-oriented and norm-based diplomacy in the region (Prasad, 2018). It suggests that the meaning and significance of the Indo-Pacific are shaped by the narratives and discourses employed by states, which in turn influence their foreign policy choices and regional engagement. The causal relationship in constructivism is that shared ideas and identities lead to particular interests and behaviours, rather than interests being pre-given by material capabilities. This implies that understanding the Indo-Pacific requires analysing the evolving norms, values, and identities that states project and internalize, as these shape the very fabric of regional order.

INDIA'S IDENTITY AND ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

From a constructivist perspective, India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is deeply influenced by its evolving self-perception and its efforts to project a particular identity on the global stage. India's growing engagement with the region can be seen as a "reflection of its desire to craft a new external identity for itself—the identity of an 'Asia-Pacific player'". This aligns with the argument that India's

foreign policies are driven by its self-perception of being a player of "global significance".

The concept of "role convergence" is particularly relevant here, where the alignment of states' internal role conceptions with each other's role expectations contributes significantly to strategic partnerships. For instance, the strengthening of India-Japan strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific is not solely due to shared interests in counterbalancing China, but also because of the alignment of their self-ascribed national roles and the expectations they have of each other. This highlights that shared values and principles, such as democratic values, can serve as significant factors in shaping balancing strategies against authoritarian states.

India's narrative of the Indo-Pacific emphasizes its "millennia-old connection" with Southeast Asia, rooted in peace, friendship, religion, culture, art, and commerce (Heiduk, 2020). This historical anchoring serves to legitimize India's role and assert its "co-production" of the Indo-Pacific concept. By framing its engagement as a natural continuation of historical ties, India shapes the meaning of the Indo-Pacific to align with its non-aligned heritage and strategic autonomy, making its approach more palatable to a wider range of regional actors. This implies that India's identity as a responsible, inclusive, and historically connected power is a key driver of its Indo-Pacific strategy, influencing its diplomatic choices and its emphasis on multilateral cooperation.

NORMS, VALUES, AND THE CONTESTED INDO-PACIFIC ORDER

The Indo-Pacific is a contested space where different actors promote competing norms and values, shaping the very nature of the regional order. Constructivism helps explain how the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept, while seemingly a liberal ideal, also functions as a value-based construct aimed at promoting specific norms. However, this concept is "contested" and "theoretically problematic and practically flawed" when viewed in isolation, as it faces challenges

like "threat deficiency" among member states and weak institutional foundations.

The debate about the Indo-Pacific often involves "cold war structured 'rimland/heartland' stories ('us versus them' narratives)" that frame contemporary rivalries (Palabiyik, 2020). This highlights how shared ideas and narratives, even if based on historical tropes, can influence perceptions of threats and shape policy responses. The decline in human rights and democracy in many Indo-Pacific countries also poses a challenge to the normative aspirations of a liberal order, underscoring the fragility of shared values.

India's "low-resolution liberalism" in the Indo-Pacific, which prioritizes diversity at the inter-state level and insists on "inclusive rather than exclusive order management," can be understood through a constructivist lens. This approach allows India to maintain its strategic autonomy while still engaging with partners on shared concerns, reflecting a unique blend of normative commitment and pragmatic self-interest. The causal relationship is that the contestation over norms and values in the Indo-Pacific directly influences the formation of regional groupings and the evolution of the regional order, with states actively shaping the ideational landscape to serve their perceived interests.

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: DECONSTRUCTING SPATIAL NARRATIVES

Critical Geopolitics offers a vital theoretical lens for understanding the Indo-Pacific, moving beyond a purely objective geographical understanding to examine how spatial concepts are constructed and utilized in the service of political interests and power dynamics.

CORE TENETS OF CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

Critical Geopolitics fundamentally argues that geopolitical knowledge is not an inherent or natural fact but rather "discursive knowledge" (Sil, 2010). It views geographical concepts, such as the "Indo-Pacific," not as neutral descriptors but as "old but forgotten discursive constructs"

that have been "re-employed" in contemporary times for specific political purposes (Johnson et al., 2020). From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is an "artificial region," a product of "political interests and manipulation" rather than a naturally occurring geographical entity. This framework emphasizes the role of discourse and "myth-making" in shaping geopolitical imaginations, highlighting the inherent ambiguity in the application of a seemingly unified Indo-Pacific concept.

Critical Geopolitics challenges the dominance of classical IR paradigms like realism, neoliberalism, and constructivism, advocating for theoretical diversity and pluralism (Bhatia, 2024). It recognizes that no single theory can fully capture the complexity of global politics, particularly when analysing how geographical spaces are defined and contested. The core argument of critical geopolitics—that regions are "willed into existence" by political actors, implies that the very act of naming and defining the Indo-Pacific is a strategic manoeuvre. This means that the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" discourse is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, designed to legitimize certain policies (e.g., Quad formation) and delegitimize others (e.g., China's assertive actions). The causal relationship is that political interests and power struggles drive the discursive construction and re-framing of geographical spaces to shape perceptions and influence policy outcomes. Understanding the Indo-Pacific, therefore, necessitates analysing *who* defines it, *how* they define it, and *why* they do so, rather than simply accepting it as a given geographical reality.

THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A DISCURSIVE AND CONTESTED SPACE

The Indo-Pacific is a space of intense discursive contestation, where various actors articulate differing definitions and visions, each reflecting their distinct strategic interests and power struggles. The geopolitical identity of the Indo-Pacific is not static; it "differs both temporally and spatially".⁵³ This has resulted in "two different Indo-

Pacific geopolitical constructs": a "maritime Indo-Pacific" (primarily favored by the United States and Australia) and a "wider Indo-Pacific" (more aligned with the perspectives of Japan and India). These distinct conceptualizations underscore the political nature of regional definitions.

The region is characterized by "contested geographical boundaries" and intense competition among major powers vying for influence, effectively making it a "geopolitical playground". China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US-led Quad alliance represent "opposing forces" and "competing visions" for the region's future order, each seeking to shape the narrative and influence regional states. The ongoing debate about the Indo-Pacific often conflates "old and new models of territorial threats" and "sovereignty claims," leading to "cold war structured 'rimland/heartland' stories ('us versus them' narratives)". This suggests that historical geopolitical tropes are being re-employed to frame contemporary rivalries.

Beyond material power competition, the Indo-Pacific is a battleground for ideas and narratives. The existence of distinct "maritime" versus "wider" Indo-Pacific concepts indicates that states are actively engaged in shaping the region's identity to align with their strategic interests. This implies that the "geopolitical imagination" of state actors directly influences their foreign policy choices and regional engagement (Philips, 2016). Therefore, understanding the Indo-Pacific requires analysing the underlying discourses and how they legitimize or challenge specific power configurations and policy actions.

INDIA'S NARRATIVE AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

India constructs its own distinct narrative of the Indo-Pacific, one that emphasizes historical continuity and strategic autonomy, thereby differentiating its approach from other major powers. India's narrative highlights its "millennia-old connection" with Southeast Asia, rooted in peace, friendship, religion, culture, art, and commerce. This historical anchoring suggests a "return to a 'normal' understanding of

the Asian space," viewing the historical separation of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as "artificial" and imposed by colonial powers (Tow, 2015). This framing legitimizes India's role and asserts its "co-production" of the Indo-Pacific concept (Scot, 2012).

India's approach is further characterized by "strategic adaptability" and a pragmatic willingness to work with "varying sets of long-standing friends and emerging partners on specific issues," deliberately avoiding rigid alliances that might constrain its foreign policy options. This commitment to strategic autonomy has a "two-fold connotation": building alliances with the West while simultaneously maintaining "diversity, plurality, and Indian values intact". This dual approach impacts its strategies for connectivity, maritime security, and regionalism, allowing India to navigate complex geopolitical currents without being forced to choose exclusive alignments.

India's "Act East Policy" and its consistent advocacy for an "inclusive regional architecture" complement its broader Indo-Pacific vision, further differentiating its approach from those primarily focused on containment (Delios et al., 2023). By framing its Indo-Pacific engagement as a natural continuation of millennia-old ties, rather than a novel response to recent geopolitical shifts, India legitimizes its role and asserts its "co-production" of the Indo-Pacific concept. This implies that India's critical geopolitical strategy involves shaping the *meaning* of the Indo-Pacific to align with its non-aligned heritage and strategic autonomy, making its engagement more palatable to a wider range of regional actors and enhancing its soft power.

MANDALA THEORY: AN INDIGENOUS INDIAN STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Kautilya's Mandala Theory, originating from ancient Indian strategic thought, offers a unique, endogenous framework for understanding state interactions that remains remarkably relevant to contemporary geopolitics, particularly from an Indian perspective.

Origins and Principles of Kautilya's Mandala Theory

Kautilya's Mandala Theory, meticulously outlined in the ancient Indian treatise *Arthashastra* (circa 4th century BCE), provides a sophisticated strategic framework based on concentric circles of alliances and adversaries (Kajari et al., 2022). At its core is the "would-be conqueror" state (Vijigishu), which seeks to expand its influence and secure its position. The theory posits a fundamental principle: the "immediate neighbouring state is a natural enemy" (Ari), while the state beyond the immediate neighbour is likely to be an ally (Mitra) (Patrick, 2020). This concept extends to various other categories of states, including neutral states (Madhyama) and intermediary states (Udasina), forming a complex web of relationships.

Mandala Theory is deeply rooted in "realpolitik," advocating that states should pragmatically pursue their interests, often disregarding moral or ideological considerations (Mohan, 2019). To achieve strategic objectives, Kautilya advised a "six-fold policy" (Sadgunya), which includes co-existence, neutrality, alliance, double policy (dual approach), march (military action), and war (Jagannath, 2021). Complementing these policies are "five tactics" (Upayas): conciliation (saam), gift and bribery (daam), dissension (bheda), deceit and pretense (danda), and open attack or war (danda, in a broader sense). The Mandala Theory, as an ancient Indian strategic framework, provides a unique, non-Western lens for understanding India's foreign policy. Its emphasis on "realpolitik" and the inherent rivalry with immediate neighbors aligns closely with core realist tenets but is rooted in India's own historical and cultural context (Taraknath, 1945). This implies that India's strategic culture has long possessed a pragmatic, power-oriented dimension, offering a historically continuous and culturally resonant framework for analyzing its actions in the international system, even before the advent of Western IR theories.

Applicability of Mandala Theory to Contemporary Indo-Pacific Dynamics

The contemporary Indo-Pacific region vividly illustrates the enduring applicability of Kautilya's Mandala principles. The theory's core tenet—that a state's immediate neighbor is often a competitor, while distant powers can act as allies—finds clear resonance in India's foreign policy (Kautilya, 1967). India's historically strained relations with Pakistan and its ongoing border disputes and strategic competition with China align perfectly with the Mandala's assumption that neighbouring states often remain in conflict (Ari). China's strategic alignment with Pakistan, exemplified by projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), further reinforces this dynamic, serving as a modern "Sahaj Ari" (strategic adversary) that reminds of Kautilya's caution on external powers exploiting the Mandala.

Conversely, India's deepening partnerships with geographically distant powers such as the United States, France, and Japan serve as contemporary "counterbalancing mechanisms" (Mitra) against its immediate adversaries (Effendi 2019). India's efforts to strengthen ties with ASEAN nations and other Western countries further demonstrate the "timelessness of Mandala's geopolitical logic". The theory's principles extend beyond traditional territorial disputes to encompass "economic and technological domains," as evidenced by the formation of digital alliances and technological blocs in the contemporary international system.

The Mandala's core tenet of immediate neighbors as potential adversaries and distant states as potential allies directly maps onto India's contemporary foreign policy. The persistent conflicts with Pakistan and China (proximate "Ari") and the deepening strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia, and France (distant "Mitra") are not disparate policies but a coherent, historically informed Kautilyan strategy (Ullah, 2021). This implies that India's "Neighbourhood First Policy" is not purely benevolent but also a pragmatic strategic effort to manage its immediate periphery, while

simultaneously building external balancing coalitions. The causal relationship is that the inherent geopolitical structure (Mandala) drives India's multi-faceted foreign policy approach (Mukherjee, 2022).

India's Maritime Mandala and Neighbourhood First Policy

India's strategic thinking has demonstrated an adaptive evolution of Kautilya's continental Mandala concept to its maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific. There is a growing imperative for India to shift its maritime strategy from a "largely continental posture" to one that focuses on its "maritime mandala". This maritime mandala "is characteristically different from a continental one," as it places a greater emphasis on cooperation in global commons and interdependent maritime trade, rather than solely focusing on states out maneuvering each other (William, 1973).

Within this maritime framework, "cooperation and collaboration" are prioritized as key tools for achieving security and prosperity ("yogakshema"). This reflects an understanding that the nature of power projection and influence in the maritime domain, especially concerning shared global commons and interconnected trade routes, necessitates collective action and institutional arrangements. India's maritime strategy, within this adapted framework, begins with securing its homeland maritime infrastructure and island assets (the core), then extends to the maritime space beyond its immediate waters and island neighbors.

India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the upgraded MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) visions are central to its maritime doctrine. These initiatives emphasize inclusive multilateral cooperation and position India as a "net security provider" or "preferred security partner" in the Indian Ocean Region and the wider Global South. The adaptation of Kautilya's continental Mandala to a "maritime mandala" represents a significant theoretical innovation. While Kautilya's original theory focused on territorial conquest and rivalry, the maritime context, with its emphasis on global commons

and interdependent trade, necessitates a greater focus on "cooperation and collaboration" to achieve national interests. This implies that while the underlying realist logic of self-interest remains, the *means* to achieve it in the maritime domain are more liberal-leaning, involving collective security and institutional arrangements. The causal relationship is that the changing nature of the geopolitical environment (maritime domain, globalization) leads to the reinterpretation and adaptation of traditional strategic frameworks, demonstrating a unique "Indian way" of engaging with the international system.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEORETICAL PARADIGMS: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

This section offers a detailed comparative analysis of the five theoretical paradigms, exploring their interplay, individual strengths, and limitations in explaining India's interests and actions in the Indo-Pacific. It culminates in an argument for the necessity of an eclectic approach to fully grasp the complexities of India's strategic engagement.

INTERPLAY AND OVERLAP OF THEORIES

The complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region cannot be fully understood through the exclusive lens of a single International Relations theory. Instead, a multi-paradigmatic approach is essential, as realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical geopolitics, and even the indigenous Mandala Theory often intersect and complement each other. Kai He's "Three Faces of the Indo-Pacific" illustrates this point by suggesting that the region can be simultaneously understood through Realism (as a balancing strategy), Liberalism (as an institutional setting), and Constructivism (as an ideational construct). While He argues that these individual theoretical interpretations might be "theoretically problematic and practically flawed" in isolation, their combined application provides a more comprehensive picture.

Scholars like T.V. Paul advocate for "cross-paradigmatic engagement" to understand regional transformation. This approach brings together

insights from various dominant IR perspectives to identify "meeting points" and generate innovative propositions that transcend traditional theoretical divides. This perspective acknowledges that the intricate links between power, interest, and norms in the Indo-Pacific "defy analytical capture by any one paradigm" and are better understood by selectively drawing on different theoretical lenses (Beeson, 2021).

An "eclectic approach" is presented as an "all-encompassing tool" for explanatory and comparative studies, capable of drawing upon multiple theories to gain complementary insights into complex issues. This approach is "problem-driven," meaning that the choice of theoretical insights and methods is determined by the specific research puzzle or real-world dilemma being addressed, rather than strict adherence to a single paradigm (Zajączkowski , 2021). The simultaneous presence of intense great power competition (Realism), the imperative for cooperation and institution-building (Liberalism), the shaping of identities and norms (Constructivism), and the contestation over regional narratives and identities (Critical Geopolitics) in the Indo-Pacific means that no single IR theory can fully explain its dynamics (Chako, 2014). This implies that a holistic understanding requires integrating insights from multiple paradigms, acknowledging their individual strengths while recognizing their limitations. The inherent complexity and multi-dimensionality of the Indo-Pacific region necessitate a multi-theoretical approach to capture its dynamics accurately and provide richer explanations.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF EACH PARADIGM FOR INDIA'S INTERESTS

Each theoretical paradigm offers distinct advantages and disadvantages in explaining India's strategic choices and outcomes in the Indo-Pacific. A critical evaluation reveals where each theory provides strong explanatory power and where it falls short from an India-centric perspective.

Realism:

- **Strengths:** Realism is highly effective in explaining India's balancing behaviour against China, its participation in the Quad, and its concerns regarding the security dilemma posed by China's naval expansion and the Belt and Road Initiative(Baruah, 2022). It underscores India's fundamental pursuit of power and security in an anarchic international system, particularly in response to perceived threats from its immediate neighbourhood and rising powers.
- **Limitations:** Realism may overemphasize conflictual aspects and potentially underplay the cooperative dimensions or ideational factors that also shape India's foreign policy. It might struggle to fully explain India's "low-resolution liberalism" or its consistent emphasis on inclusivity beyond pure power balancing. It also tends to overlook the role of non-state actors and the nuances of diplomatic engagement beyond power politics.

Liberalism:

- **Strengths:** Liberalism effectively explains India's commitment to a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and its active participation in multilateral forums like ASEAN-led mechanisms, Quad, and IORA. It highlights India's efforts to foster economic integration, address non-traditional security threats (e.g., climate change, disaster relief), and promote sustainable development through cooperation (e.g., SAGAR, MAHASAGAR). It captures India's desire for a stable and prosperous region through institutional engagement.
- **Limitations:** Liberalism may struggle to account for the persistent great power rivalries and the limitations of institutions in constraining state behaviour, particularly China's assertive actions. It might not fully capture India's selective engagement with liberal norms, especially its

emphasis on strategic autonomy and avoidance of explicit containment alliances (Palabıyık, 2020). The "weak economic and institutional foundations" for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific also pose a challenge to a purely liberal explanation.

Constructivism:

- **Strengths:** Constructivism is strong in explaining how the "Indo-Pacific" itself is an "ideational construct" shaped by shared values and identities. It effectively accounts for India's evolving self-perception and its efforts to project an identity as a "global significance" player or "Asia-Pacific player" (Maan, 2025). It also illuminates how role convergence and shared democratic values influence India's strategic partnerships, such as with Japan.
- **Limitations:** Constructivism might sometimes overemphasize ideational factors at the expense of material power dynamics or economic interests. While it explains how identities and norms are constructed, it may not fully predict how these constructs translate into specific policy outcomes, especially when faced with strong material constraints or conflicting interests. It can also struggle to explain why certain ideas gain traction over others or why states might act against their professed values.

Critical Geopolitics:

- **Strengths:** Critical Geopolitics excels at explaining how the "Indo-Pacific" itself is a constructed concept, serving the political interests and narratives of various actors, including India. It illuminates India's efforts to shape the regional discourse, emphasizing historical continuity and its unique "inclusive" vision, thereby differentiating its approach from others (Sundararaman, 2017). This theory reveals the ideational warfare at play, where competing narratives influence strategic behaviour and foreign policy choices.

- **Limitations:** This approach might risk overemphasizing discourse and underplaying the material realities of power distribution and economic interests that also drive state behaviour. While it explains *how* narratives are constructed, it may not fully account for the *causal impact* of these narratives on concrete policy outcomes or the underlying structural constraints that states face.

Mandala Theory:

- **Strengths:** Mandala Theory provides an indigenous, historically resonant framework for understanding India's strategic culture and its dual-track foreign policy: managing immediate neighbors (often adversaries) while cultivating distant allies (Wambrauw, 2023). It offers a coherent explanation for India's persistent security concerns with Pakistan and China and its deepening partnerships with the US, Japan, and France as a form of external balancing. The concept of a "maritime mandala" effectively adapts this ancient wisdom to the contemporary maritime domain, highlighting the need for cooperation in global commons (Tharoor et al., 2020).
- **Limitations:** As an ancient theory, its direct applicability to modern, globalized, and interdependent international relations can be limited without significant adaptation. It may not fully account for the complexities of multilateral institutions, non-state actors, or the ideational dimensions of international relations that are central to other theories. Its inherent focus on state-centric rivalry might also underplay the potential for genuine cooperation beyond transactional alliances.

AN ECLECTIC APPROACH TO INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Given the strengths and limitations of individual theoretical paradigms, an eclectic approach emerges as the most suitable

framework for a comprehensive understanding of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Analytical eclecticism, as a "middle-range causal account," allows for the selective combination of complementary theoretical frameworks, integrating "complex interactions among multiple mechanisms and logics drawn from more than one paradigm". This approach is "problem-driven," focusing on real-world dilemmas rather than rigid adherence to a single theoretical school.

For India, an eclectic approach allows for a nuanced understanding of its strategic autonomy, which blends elements of realist balancing (against China), liberal institutionalism (through Quad, ASEAN, IORA), constructivist identity-shaping, and a critical geopolitical awareness of narrative construction. India's strategic adaptability, working pragmatically with diverse partners while avoiding "alliances of containment," is best explained by drawing from multiple theoretical insights. This multi-theoretical lens reveals that India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is not monolithic but a dynamic interplay of power considerations, economic imperatives, normative aspirations, and historical strategic culture. The complex links between power, interest, and norms in the Indo-Pacific "defy analytical capture by any one paradigm" and are made more intelligible by selectively drawing on different theoretical lenses. This approach provides a richer and more accurate explanation of India's multifaceted engagement in the region.

**TABLES: ANALYSIS OF THEORETICAL PARADIGMS
FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE**

The following tables provide a structured analysis of how each theoretical paradigm applies to the Indo-Pacific region, specifically from India's perspective, highlighting key aspects, implications, and examples.

Table 2.1: Realism and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Core Realist Tenets	Application to Indo-Pacific (India's Perspective)	Implications for India's Strategy	Examples of India's Actions
Anarchy & Self-Help	International system lacks central authority; India must ensure its own security and survival in a competitive region.	Prioritization of military capabilities and strategic partnerships for self-preservation.	Strengthening naval power, indigenous defence production.
Balance of Power	China's rise necessitates balancing actions to prevent regional hegemony. India is seen as a natural balancer.	Cultivation of alliances and partnerships with like-minded states to counter Chinese influence.	Active participation in the Quad (US, Japan, Australia).
Security Dilemma	China's military expansion (e.g., naval presence, BRI ports) is perceived as threatening India's security, leading to reciprocal actions.	Increased defence spending, enhanced maritime domain awareness, and strategic counter-investments.	Concerns over Hambantota and Gwadar ports; "two-front war" perception.
Geopolitical Competition	Competition for influence over critical sea lanes and regional states.	Focus on securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and expanding influence in the Indian Ocean Region.	SAGAR and MAHASAGAR initiatives; deepening defence cooperation with Southeast Asian states.

Table 2.2: Liberalism and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Core Liberal Tenets	Application to Indo-Pacific (India's Perspective)	Implications for India's Strategy	Examples of India's Actions
International Institutions	Institutions facilitate cooperation and collective security, even amidst anarchy.	Active engagement in multilateral forums to shape regional norms and foster collaboration.	Support for ASEAN centrality; participation in IORA, ADMM-Plus.
Economic Interdependence	Trade and economic ties reduce incentives for conflict and promote mutual prosperity.	Focus on connectivity initiatives, trade agreements, and investment flows to deepen regional integration	Act East Policy's economic dimension; emphasis on unimpeded flow of commerce.
Rules-Based Order	Adherence to international law and norms ensures stability and predictability.	Advocacy for freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for sovereignty.	Endorsement of "free and open Indo-Pacific"; upholding UNCLOS.
Shared Values/Democracy	Democratic states are less likely to fight each other; shared values can foster cooperation.	Strategic partnerships with democracies (Quad) to promote common principles, albeit with India's unique interpretation.	Cooperation with US, Japan, Australia on common security challenges, climate change, technology.

Table 2.3: Constructivism and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Core Constructivist Tenets	Application to Indo-Pacific (India's Perspective)	Implications for India's Strategy	Examples of India's Actions
Social Construction of Reality	The Indo-Pacific is an "ideational construct" shaped by shared ideas, norms, and values, not just material forces.	India actively contributes to shaping the regional identity and discourse to align with its strategic vision.	India's emphasis on "Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific" as a value-based concept.
Identity and Role	States' self-perceptions and roles influence their foreign policy and interactions.	India seeks to project an identity as a responsible "Asia-Pacific player" and a power of "global significance."	India's "Act East Policy" as a means to craft a new external identity; role convergence with partners like Japan.
Norms and Values	Shared norms and values can foster cooperation and shape state behavior.	India promotes a rules-based order and shared democratic values, but with an emphasis on inclusivity and strategic autonomy.	India's "low-resolution liberalism"; discomfort with Indo-Pacific as solely a containment strategy.
Discourse and Narrative	Language and narratives construct meaning and influence geopolitical imaginations.	India's narrative emphasizes historical continuity and "co-production" of the Indo-Pacific concept.	Highlighting "millennia-old connections" with Southeast Asia; framing its engagement as a natural evolution.

Table 2.4: Critical Geopolitics and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Core Critical Geopolitics Tenets	Application to Indo-Pacific (India's Perspective)	Implications for India's Strategy	Examples of India's Actions
Discursive Construction of Space	The "Indo-Pacific" is not a natural region but a political construct shaped by state narratives.	India actively shapes its own narrative of the Indo-Pacific to legitimize its role and differentiate its approach.	Emphasis on "millennia-old connections" and "return to normal understanding" of Asia.
Contested Geopolitical Identities	Different actors hold varying "geopolitical imaginations" of the region (e.g., maritime vs. wider Indo-Pacific).	India advocates for a "wider Indo-Pacific" and an "inclusive" regional architecture, contrasting with containment-focused narratives.	India's "inclusive rather than exclusive order management"; discomfort with anti-China framing.
Myth-making & Strategic Narratives	States use historical narratives and myths to legitimize current foreign policy and assert co-production of concepts.	India's narrative emphasizes continuity with its strategic thought (e.g., Look East Policy) to assert its natural commitment to the region.	Linking Indo-Pacific to Nehruvian thought and "extended neighborhood".
Power/Knowledge Nexus	Geopolitical knowledge is intertwined with power; defining the	India's efforts to define the Indo-Pacific reflect its ambition to be a norm-setter	India's "low-resolution liberal order" allows flexibility and broad appeal.

	region is an act of power.	and influential player in regional order.	
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Table 2.5: Mandala Theory and India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Core Mandala Theory Tenets	Application to Indo-Pacific (India's Perspective)	Implications for India's Strategy	Examples of India's Actions
Vijigishu (Would-be Conqueror)	India as the central power seeking to secure its interests and expand its influence.	Proactive and assertive foreign policy to maintain regional dominance and strategic space.	India's Act East Policy, SAGAR, MAHASAGAR as frameworks for engagement.
Ari (Immediate Neighbour as Enemy)	Immediate neighbors (Pakistan, China) are natural adversaries due to geographical proximity.	Persistent security concerns, border management, and strategic competition with these states.	Border tensions with China; adversarial relations with Pakistan.
Mitra (Friend beyond the Enemy)	States beyond immediate neighbors are potential allies.	Cultivation of strong strategic partnerships with distant powers to balance immediate threats.	Alliances with US, Japan, France, Australia as counterbalancing mechanisms.
Six-Fold Policy (Sadgunya)	Pragmatic foreign policy involving various diplomatic and military tactics.	Flexible engagement, including co-existence, alliances, and strategic maneuvers to achieve national interests.	Balancing Quad participation with avoidance of explicit containment alliances; "Neighbourhood First Policy".

Conclusion: Synthesizing the geo-strategic paradigm of Indo-Pacific

The geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific is undeniable, driven by its economic vitality, critical maritime routes, and the intensifying great power competition. This chapter has demonstrated that understanding India's multifaceted engagement in this region necessitates a comprehensive theoretical approach, moving beyond the confines of any single paradigm.

Realism effectively illuminates India's security-driven calculus, particularly its balancing strategies against China's growing military and economic assertiveness. The perception of a "two-front war" threat and the strengthening of alliances like the Quad are direct manifestations of India's realist pursuit of power and survival in an anarchic system. However, a purely realist lens risks overlooking the cooperative and normative dimensions of India's foreign policy.

Liberalism provides crucial insights into India's commitment to a rules-based order, multilateral institutions, and economic interdependence. India's "Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific" vision and its SAGAR/MAHASAGAR doctrines reflect a genuine desire to foster cooperation, promote shared prosperity, and address non-traditional security challenges through collective action. Yet, India's "low-resolution liberalism" underscores its pragmatic adaptation of liberal norms, prioritizing strategic autonomy and inclusivity over rigid ideological alignments.

Constructivism offers a vital lens for understanding how ideas, norms, and identities shape the Indo-Pacific as a social construct. It highlights India's efforts to project a specific identity and its emphasis on historical continuity and "co-production" of the regional concept, influencing its diplomatic choices and partnerships.

Critical Geopolitics reveals that the "Indo-Pacific" is not merely a geographical descriptor but a contested discursive construct. India actively shapes its own narrative, emphasizing historical continuity and its unique inclusive vision, thereby legitimizing its role and

differentiating its approach from other powers. This highlights the importance of ideational factors and narrative control in shaping regional dynamics and foreign policy choices.

Finally, Kautilya's Mandala Theory offers an invaluable indigenous framework for understanding India's strategic culture. Its principles of immediate neighbors as adversaries and distant states as allies provide a coherent explanation for India's dual-track foreign policy of managing its periphery while building external balancing coalitions. The adaptation of this continental theory to a "maritime mandala" underscores India's innovative approach to security and prosperity in a globalized, interdependent maritime domain.

In conclusion, India's Indo-Pacific strategy is a complex tapestry woven from threads of power politics, institutional cooperation, identity-shaping, discursive construction, and indigenous strategic thought. No single IR theory can fully capture this complexity. Therefore, an eclectic approach, which selectively integrates insights from Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Critical Geopolitics, and Mandala Theory, is essential for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding. This multi-paradigmatic lens reveals India's strategic autonomy as a dynamic interplay of these diverse theoretical underpinnings, allowing New Delhi to navigate the intricate geopolitical currents of the Indo-Pacific while safeguarding its national interests and contributing to regional stability. The future trajectory of the Indo-Pacific, and India's role within it, will continue to be shaped by the interplay of these theoretical forces, demanding ongoing analytical flexibility and a holistic perspective

Chapter 3

China's Rise and the Transformation of Regional Order

The geopolitical architecture of the twenty-first century is being fundamentally redesigned by the rapid and multifaceted emergence of the People's Republic of China as a systemic competitor to the established global order. This transformation is most acutely felt in the Indo-Pacific, a vast maritime expanse that has transitioned from a primarily economic concept into the central locus of global strategic contestation. The evolution from the narrower "Asia-Pacific" framework to a strategically charged "Indo-Pacific" represents a paradigm shift in how global power is conceptualized, acknowledging the inextricable linkages between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In this "mega-region," the rise of Chinese power acts as the primary catalyst for regional instability, compelling a recalibration of grand strategies among established and emerging powers alike.

At the heart of this shift lies a deep contestation over the fundamental norms and rules governing international relations. The Liberal International Order (LIO), which has structured interstate relations since 1945, is currently experiencing an "epistemic rupture" (Kessler, 2026). As the United States grapples with internal political volatility and a shift toward transactional "resolute global leadership," Beijing has moved to fill the perceived vacuum by constructing an alternative set of norms, institutions, and security frameworks designed to

facilitate a "Pax Sinica" (Romaniuk, 2026). This contest is no longer restricted to traditional military deterrence; it has expanded into an "administrative arms race" in economic statecraft and a high-stakes narrative war for "ideational supremacy".

The Trajectory of Chinese Power

The trajectory of Chinese power in the mid-2020s reflects a sophisticated transition from a strategy of "hide and bide" to an assertive drive for "national rejuvenation" and global leadership. This evolution is not merely a product of increased material capabilities but is reinforced by a comprehensive doctrinal framework that integrates development, security, and governance into a singular strategic vision. Beijing's contemporary statecraft is organized around **four major global initiatives**: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), and the recently introduced Global Governance Initiative (GGI).

The Four Pillars and Rule-Shaping Ambitions

The Global Governance Initiative (GGI), introduced in late 2025, represents the culminating "fourth pillar" of Xi Jinping's statecraft. It is designed to reform global systems and international organizations to accommodate Chinese interests and norms, transitioning China from a "rule-taker" to a "rule-shaper". By 2026, China had become the second-largest financial contributor to the United Nations and had strategically placed its nationals in leadership roles across specialized agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). This institutional co-option allows Beijing to transform international bodies into "China-fit organizations" that magnify its preferred narratives while systematically suppressing dissent through procedural manoeuvres and the obstruction of independent civil society actors.

In the realm of security, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) offers a normative alternative to the US-led alliance system. Launched in 2022

and gaining significant traction across the Global South by 2026, the GSI advocates for "indivisible security" and rejects "unilateralism and bloc-security alliances" as relics of a Cold War mentality. Beijing utilizes the GSI to project itself as a global mediator, as evidenced by its role in the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in March 2023 and its efforts to manage the diplomacy of the Russia-Ukraine conflict through the "Friends of Peace" platform. This strategy aims to delegitimize Western security paradigms by highlighting their perceived "governance deficits" and offering a model that prioritizes state sovereignty and development-led stability.

Economic Structural Realities and the "Peak China" Debate

Despite these expansive global ambitions, the trajectory of Chinese power is increasingly constrained by domestic structural challenges. After decades of hyper-growth, China's economic ascent slowed significantly between 2018 and 2025, with GDP growth slipping to approximately 3 percent in the mid-2020s. This slowdown is a consequence of several factors: the self-imposed "Zero COVID" lockdowns, a regulatory crackdown on private-sector enterprises that has stifled innovation, and a demographic crisis characterized by a shrinking workforce and a rapidly aging population.

Scholars of offensive realism, most notably John Mearsheimer, argue that this economic deceleration may not lead to a moderation of Beijing's revisionist ambitions. Instead, it might create a "closing window of opportunity" in which the CCP perceives its military power to be at a relative peak compared to its long-term resource base. This "Peak China" thesis suggests that the current decade represents the most dangerous period in the Indo-Pacific, as an increasingly anxious leadership in Beijing may be tempted to take "norm-shattering risks"—such as a decisive move against Taiwan—to achieve its core objectives before its relative national strength wanes. The strategy of military-civil fusion (MCF) serves as the primary mechanism for mitigating these constraints, aiming to integrate civilian technological

advancements in AI, quantum computing, and semiconductors directly into the PLA's warfighting readiness.

The Sino-Russian Strategic Triangle and Eurasian Hegemony

A defining feature of China's current power trajectory is the deepening, albeit highly asymmetric, strategic partnership with the Russian Federation. By 2025, Chinese assessments characterized this relationship as a "collective security architecture in Eurasia". Russia, weakened by its protracted conflict in Ukraine and its resulting status as a "pariah" in Western markets, has effectively been forced into a "vassalized junior partner" role. This has granted Beijing exclusive access to top-tier Russian weapons technology, rare minerals, and a secure energy supply that circumvents US-controlled maritime chokepoints.

Strategic Component	Core Initiative	Strategic Objective	Regional Impact (2025-2026)
Governance	Global Governance Initiative (GGI)	Institutional Co-option	Reshaping ITU standards for 6G and AI governance.
Security	Global Security Initiative (GSI)	Normative Displacement	Undermining the legitimacy of US-led alliances (Quad, AUKUS).
Development	Global Development Initiative (GDI)	Economic Dependency	Exporting the "China Model" of development to the Global South.
Ideology	Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI)	Narrative Supremacy	Challenging Western "universal values" with "mutual learning".

Strategic Component	Core Initiative	Strategic Objective	Regional Impact (2025-2026)
Technology	Military-Civil Fusion (MCF)	Technological Autonomy	Integrating AI into PLA joint operations and C4ISR systems.

Table- 3.1 Four major global initiatives of China

However, this partnership remains fragile. Russian resistance to total dependency, fueled by an "exaggerated sense of autonomy," and lingering disputes over regional influence in the Arctic and Central Asia create friction. By 2026, the Sino-Russian axis is viewed by realists as a "disastrous marriage" of structural necessity rather than deep ideological alignment. Beijing must balance its support for Moscow against the risk of secondary sanctions and the potential for a complete breakdown of its economic ties with the European Union and the United States.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially the "Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," remains the primary geopolitical and geoeconomic vehicle for China's expansion. Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has evolved from a collection of hard infrastructure projects into a global network that, as of 2026, encompasses 149 countries and over 75% of the world's population. The initiative serves a dual purpose: it develops new markets for Chinese firms to export excess industrial capacity while simultaneously creating a network of logistical hubs that enhance Beijing's strategic reach.

The Maritime Silk Road and the "String of Pearls" Logic

The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is the oceanic component of this strategy, linking the Chinese coast through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean to East Africa and Europe. Beijing’s extensive port

investments—including Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Djibouti are meticulously analysed through the "String of Pearls" lens. While ostensibly commercial, these projects possess undeniable dual-use potential, providing the PLA Navy with the logistical infrastructure necessary for sustained blue-water operations in the Indian Ocean.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with a total investment estimated at \$62 billion, remains the crown jewel of the BRI. CPEC provides China with a direct land link to the Arabian Sea, potentially bypassing the "Malacca Dilemma"—the vulnerability of China's energy imports to a maritime blockade at the Strait of Malacca. For India, the BRI and CPEC represent a direct threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, leading New Delhi to consistently refuse participation. The case of Hambantota Port, which was leased to China for 99 years following a debt default by Sri Lanka in 2017, serves as the primary piece of evidence for the "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative, suggesting that Beijing intentionally utilizes unsustainable loans to secure strategic footholds.

The Digital Silk Road and Techno-Authoritarian Normalization

A significant transformation in the BRI's focus by the mid-2020s is the elevation of the Digital Silk Road (DSR). Through the export of "smart city" projects, surveillance equipment, and fibre-optic networks, China is embedding its techno-authoritarian norms into the governance structures of participating nations. Investigations have revealed that DSR projects in African and Southeast Asian urban centres generate data streams that are accessible to Chinese state security agencies, effectively augmenting human intelligence (HUMINT) with digital monitoring.

This vision of "cyber sovereignty" promotes the idea that individual states should exercise absolute control over digital infrastructure and data flows, mirroring China's domestic model. By positioning its technological standards as the global baseline, Beijing seeks to normalize an international order where online surveillance, data

localization, and content control are standard practices. This "digital hegemony" not only strengthens the survival of authoritarian regimes in the Global South but also creates a path-dependency on Chinese technology, serving as an "invisible sharp edge" in the narrative war for regional order.

Strategic Setbacks and the Rise of Alternatives

By 2026, the BRI has encountered significant friction. The "colossal" nature of these infrastructure investments has led to debt crises in several recipient nations, stoking local opposition and prompting some countries to exit the initiative. Italy's departure in 2023 and Panama's withdrawal in February 2025 signalled a waning enthusiasm among states concerned with the geopolitical risks of alignment with Beijing. Furthermore, the United States and its partners have attempted to provide a competing vision through the Quad's infrastructure initiatives and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a joint India-Japan vision emphasizing quality, transparency, and sustainability.

BRI Pillar	Strategic Utility	Key Challenges (2025-2026)	Indian Counter-Strategy
MSR (Maritime)	Naval logistics; SLOC control.	Debt crises; local sovereignty concerns.	"Necklace of Diamonds" (Agaléga, Duqm, Sabang).
CPEC (Land)	Bypassing Malacca; encircling India.	Insurgency; sovereign violation in PoK.	INSTC and Chabahar Port development.
DSR (Digital)	Data control; techno-norms.	Data security backlash; US export controls.	UPI integration and DPI leadership.

BRI Pillar	Strategic Utility	Key Challenges (2025-2026)	Indian Counter-Strategy
Green Silk Road	Supply chain dominance.	Protectionist tariffs from EU and US.	Quad Critical Minerals Initiative.

However, the "implementation gap" between Western rhetoric and delivery remains a major challenge. While the Quad pledged \$50 billion for infrastructure between 2022 and 2027, the concrete deliverables—such as a single subsea cable in Palau pale in comparison to the scale of Chinese engagement. The "scale vs. standards" dilemma often forces developing nations to choose the rapid, large-scale financing of the BRI over the high-standard but slow-moving alternatives offered by the West and its partners.

Military Modernization and Naval Expansion

The expansion of Chinese military capability represents the most direct challenge to the existing security order in the Indo-Pacific. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone a rapid metamorphosis from a coastal "brown-water" fleet into a "blue-water" force capable of regional sea control and global power projection. By 2025, the PLAN was the largest navy in the world by hull count, featuring a modernized fleet of versatile destroyers, stealthy attack submarines, and an increasingly sophisticated aircraft carrier program.

The CNS Fujian and the Three-Carrier Era

The commissioning of the *CNS Fujian* (Type 003) on November 5, 2025, signalled a "tectonic shift" in the naval balance of power. Unlike its predecessors, the *Liaoning* and *Shandong*, which utilize ski-jump ramps, the 80,000-ton *Fujian* is equipped with independently designed electromagnetic catapults (EMALS). This capability allows the carrier to launch heavier fixed-wing aircraft, including the KJ-600 airborne early warning platform and the fifth-generation J-35 "Blue Shark"

stealth fighter, significantly improving sortie generation and operational endurance.

By early 2026, the *Fujian* was undergoing a rapid transition from initial to full operational capability (FOC), conducting "far-sea training" designed to test carrier strike group (CSG) integration in open-ocean environments far from land-based support. Chinese analysts contend that the *Fujian* positions the PLAN as a "world-class" navy, capable of projecting power far beyond the first island chain and potentially challenging the US Navy's carrier strike group dominance in the Western Pacific. Simultaneously, the construction of a fourth carrier, the nuclear-powered "Type 004," has reportedly been underway since 2024, aiming for even greater endurance and global reach.

Operational Tempo and Grey-Zone Dominance in 2025

The year 2025 recorded a significant surge in PLA activity across all domains. For the first time, two Chinese CSGs performed simultaneous tasks in the open waters of the Pacific, demonstrating an unprecedented operational tempo. This surge was most visible around Taiwan, where aircraft incursions into the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) reached 3,764—a 22.4% increase from 2024. These manoeuvres, following the inauguration of President William Lai in May 2024, established a higher baseline of monthly activity intended to normalize presence and exhaust the defence capabilities of the island.

In the South China Sea, Beijing has shifted its tactical focus toward Scarborough Shoal, doubling its blocking operations in the area compared to 2024. The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) has adopted an increasingly aggressive "rights enforcement" posture, utilizing water cannons and risky blocking manoeuvres against Philippine vessels. These "grey-zone" tactics are designed to alter the status quo without triggering a full-scale military response, leveraging China's quantitative naval superiority to slowly erode the sovereign claims of neighbouring states.

Shipbuilding Capacity and Strategic Missile Forces

The quantitative gap in naval power is increasing. According to the Office of Naval Intelligence, China has 230 times more shipbuilding capacity than the United States, (Balestrieri, 2026) allowing the PLAN to rapidly replace aging hulls and expand its fleet while the US Navy’s battle force remains constrained by industrial bottlenecks. This industrial advantage is complemented by a massive expansion of the PLA Rocket Force. China’s nuclear arsenal is being rapidly diversified into an operational warfighting force, including modern cruise missiles and advanced C4ISR systems designed to defeat superior adversaries in high-intensity, short-duration wars.

Table 3.2 Economic Statecraft and Coercive Diplomacy

Platform / Capability	2025-2026 Status	Strategic Function	US Response
CNS Fujian (Type 003)	Commissioned; sea trials.	Catapult-launched carrier air power.	Ford-class carrier deployment; AUKUS.
Type 055 Destroyer	Doubled fleet since 2023.	Integrated fleet defence and strike.	DDG-X program and Aegis upgrades.
J-35 "Blue Shark"	Mass deployment trials.	5th Generation naval air superiority.	F-35B/C carrier integration.
PLA Rocket Force	Rapid nuclear expansion.	A2/AD; strategic deterrence.	Integrated Deterrence; IRBM deployment.

China has pioneered a new typology of economic statecraft, characterized by the "weaponization of supply chain dependencies" and the institutionalization of coercive tools. This "administrative arms race" in Asia reflects a deeper systemic shift where governments are building formalized legal architectures to conduct economic warfare. By 2026, Beijing's economic statecraft had transitioned from a defensive model aimed at building resilience against US sanctions to an offensive posture designed to punish political defiance.

The Coercive Toolbox: Export Controls and Counter-Sanctions

The centrepiece of China's offensive statecraft is the two-pillar sanctions regime administered by the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law, adopted in 2021 and assertively deployed in 2025, provides a statutory basis for transaction bans, asset seizures, and the targeting of foreign entities that comply with US export controls. In October 2025, China utilized this law to target five US subsidiaries of Hanwha Ocean, a major South Korean shipbuilder, citing its reliance on Chinese steel and leading to a significant decline in its stock price. This move demonstrated that firms in US-allied nations are now active targets of Chinese statecraft if they integrate too deeply into the American defence industrial base.

Furthermore, China has formalized the weaponization of its monopoly over critical resources. In April and October 2025, the Ministry of Commerce added specific rare earth minerals and refining processes to its list of controlled items, responding directly to US semiconductor restrictions. The impact was immediate: exports of rare earth magnets to Japan and South Korea dropped by more than 90% in the months following the implementation of these measures.

Case Study: Japan and the Blowback of Coercion (2026)

The limits of Chinese economic coercion were tested in early 2026 during the snap election called by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. In response to Takaichi's statements regarding a military response to a Chinese naval blockade of Taiwan, Beijing imposed a

comprehensive mineral export ban on Japan and restricted seafood imports. This was seen as a significant escalation intended to undermine Takaichi’s political standing.

However, the campaign largely backfired. Takaichi’s approval ratings rose to 75% as the Japanese public resolve stiffened against external pressure. Years of prior "de-risking" initiatives had already reduced Japan’s reliance on Chinese rare earths from 90% in 2010 to 60% by 2023. Furthermore, the seafood ban was blunted as Japanese exporters successfully diversified toward ASEAN markets, which became Japan's largest seafood destination by late 2025. This episode highlights the "coercive dilemma" faced by a rising power: as Beijing seeks to lock in its advantages through coercion, it simultaneously increases the threat perception in other states, accelerating their efforts to diversify and reduce their vulnerability to Chinese leverage.

Weaponization of the "Critical Minerals" Monopoly

Despite the resilience of some states, China’s dominance in the processing of rare earths, lithium, and graphite remains a "silent blockade" capability. In 2025, European industries learned this "the hard way" when Beijing used its mineral monopoly as a geoeconomic weapon to counter EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. The revised Foreign Trade Law of December 2025 further strengthened the legal foundations for these "escalate-to-negotiate" tactics, creating a fragmented "permissioned" trading system defined by government oversight at every node of the supply chain (Holthuis, 2026).

Statecraft Typology	Actor	Primary Tool	Strategic Logic
Offensive Coercion	China	Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law.	Punishing compliance with US rules; seizing assets.

Statecraft Typology	Actor	Primary Tool	Strategic Logic
Active Defence	China	Rare Earth Export Controls.	Weaponizing supply chain monopolies for political goals.
Defensive Resilience	Japan / SK	Economic Security Clearance Act.	Insulating industry from external shocks/coercion.
Flexible Hedging	Vietnam / Indo	Trade Monitoring Toolkits.	Demonstrating compliance with US while trading with China.

Regional Responses to Chinese Assertiveness

The transformation of the regional order has prompted a diverse range of responses as states seek to navigate the "Indo-Pacific conundrum"—the tension between ambitious regional aspirations and the reality of a rising, assertive China. These responses are increasingly organized around "minilateral" frameworks, strategic hedging, and an intense struggle for narrative supremacy.

India's Strategic Identity: The Dharma-Realpolitik Paradox

India's response is uniquely informed by its civilizational heritage and a pragmatic blend of idealism and realism. This is characterized as the "Dharma-Realpolitik Paradox," where New Delhi balances moral imperatives rooted in *dharma* (ethical conduct, democratic values) with the necessities of *realpolitik* (power politics, military strength) (Chadha, 2025). Under the Modi administration, India has transitioned from Nehruvian non-alignment to a policy of "multi-alignment" or "all-alignment," positioning itself as a "global pivot state" that can engage multiple poles of power while preserving strategic autonomy.

To operationalize this, India has applied a "Neo-Mandala" framework—an adaptation of Kautilya's ancient statecraft for the

maritime domain. In this framework, India (the *Vijigishu* or aspirant conqueror) identifies immediate neighbors like Pakistan and China as natural rivals (*Ari*) and cultivates relationships with distant powers like the US, Japan, Australia, and France as potential allies (*Mitra*). This logic informs India's deepening engagement with the Quad and its role as a "preferred security partner" for Southeast Asian states, evidenced by the sale of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines and the gifting of naval assets to Vietnam in 2023.

Despite this security competition, India remains deeply integrated with the Chinese economy, experiencing a record trade deficit of \$99.2 billion in 2024-25. This creates a "mixed motive game" where New Delhi must manage a "managed rivalry," allowing Chinese participation in non-sensitive economic sectors while establishing "red lines" around strategic technology, telecommunications, and defence.

The Maturation of the Quad and AUKUS

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has evolved from an informal consultation into a functional grouping that provides essential public goods to the region, such as vaccine distribution and the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative. While India remains cautious about transforming the Quad into a formal military alliance, the grouping serves as a "natural balancer" against Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain.

In contrast, the AUKUS partnership (Australia, UK, US) represents a "dramatic escalation" of US strategic commitment. By providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and advanced undersea technologies, AUKUS establishes a high-end deterrence posture designed to maintain the regional balance of power. Despite initial concerns regarding its impact on ASEAN centrality, the alliance is increasingly accepted as a "new reality" that shifts the tectonic plates of regional geopolitics.

ASEAN at a Crossroads: Centrality vs. Fragmentation

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces an existential challenge to its "centrality" in the face of intensifying great power competition. By 2026, when the Philippines assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship, the organization was at a crossroads, struggling to maintain its "neutral balancing" strategy. Regional states responded differently to Chinese pressure based on their political identities and religious demographics, with Muslim-majority states (Malaysia, Indonesia) emphasizing solidarity with the Global South, while US-aligned states (Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam) prioritized economic security and US security guarantees.

Response Type	Mechanism	Lead Actors	Strategic Goal
High-End Deterrence	AUKUS.	Australia, US, UK.	Undersea and hypersonic parity with China.
Functional Balancing	The Quad.	India, Japan, AU, US.	Providing public goods; maritime awareness.
Multi-Alignment	"Neo-Mandala".	India.	Strategic autonomy; diversification of poles.
Archipelagic Defence	CADC.	Philippines.	Protecting sovereign maritime zones.
Institutional Hedging	AOIP / MGC.	ASEAN / India.	Preserving centrality; enmeshing Beijing.

The Philippines, under President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., has adopted a more decisive rhetoric through the "Comprehensive Archipelagic Defence Concept" (CADC), strengthening its alliance

with Washington while simultaneously attempting "baby steps" to reset ties with Beijing. However, the structural limitations of the "ASEAN Way"—prioritizing consensus and non-interference—hinder the organization's ability to resolve the South China Sea dispute or enforce a substantive Code of Conduct.

The Struggle for Narrative Supremacy

In the post-LIO world, "narrative supremacy" has become a vital strategic instrument. Beijing's GGI and GSI promote a "community of shared future" that legitimizes authoritarian governance and state control. In response, middle powers and emerging players like India are constructing narratives of "values-based realism" and "inclusive regionalism". India's emphasis on its "millennia-old connection" with Southeast Asia serves to legitimize its role and differentiate its approach from the "containment-oriented" strategies of external powers (Mayal, 2026). For middle powers, the goal is to provide a narrative that offers functional alternatives to the binary choice between American or Chinese hegemony, asserting their own agency in shaping the future regional order.

Conclusion: The Indo-Pacific Order in Transition

The transformation of the regional order as of 2026 is a hybrid and negotiated process, rather than a linear transition of power. China has successfully established itself as a "rule-shaper" and a major naval power, yet it remains constrained by regional skepticism and its own economic structural vulnerabilities. The emerging multipolar world is increasingly "adrift," characterized by a unipolar military reality, a multipolar economic landscape, and a profoundly confused political environment.

The "Indo-Pacific conundrum" remains the central challenge for the region's powers. For the United States and its allies, the challenge is to move beyond a security-centric paradigm and improve their "economic game" to provide a credible alternative to Chinese influence. For emerging powers like India, the future depends on

reconciling ambitious grand aspirations with internal capacity constraints and the formidable reality of a "Godzilla" on its border. Ultimately, the trajectory of the regional order will be determined not just by the competition between Washington and Beijing, but by the agency of regional states and their ability to forge new coalitions that preserve a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific.

Chapter 4

The United States and the Indo-Pacific: Primacy, Retrenchment, or Renewal?

American Strategic Interests in the Indo-Pacific

The United States has been the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific since the end of the Second World War. Its forward military presence with seven hundred bases and installations across the region, five formal treaty alliances, and the world's most capable blue-water navy has provided the security architecture within which the region's remarkable economic development has taken place (US Department of Defence, 2023). The stability that American primacy has provided, for all its costs and contradictions, has been a genuine public good: it has deterred great power conflict, guaranteed freedom of navigation, and created the conditions for the economic integration (Ikenberry, 2011). Yet the sustainability of this order, and America's commitment to maintaining it, has become one of the central questions of contemporary international politics.

American strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific are multiple, deeply embedded, and increasingly contested. At the most fundamental level, the United States has an interest in preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon, a power that could dominate the Indo-Pacific and use that dominance to challenge American interests globally (Mearsheimer, 2001). This interest, rooted in the logic of offshore balancing that has characterized American grand strategy since the

early twentieth century, explains why the United States fought wars in Korea and Vietnam, why it maintains formal treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and why it has invested trillions of dollars in maintaining a forward military presence that no other country can match (Layne, 2006).

The security of formal treaty allies represents the second tier of American strategic interests. The defence commitments that the United States has made to Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand are not merely diplomatic courtesies; they are legal obligations, enshrined in treaties that successive administrations have reaffirmed and that constitute the foundation of the regional security architecture (US Department of State, 2023). The credibility of these commitments, belief among allies and adversaries alike that the United States will honour them even at significant cost is itself a strategic asset, one that enables the United States to maintain influence without the need for constant demonstrations of military power (Press, 2005). But credibility is fragile, and the doubts about American commitment that have emerged in recent years, particularly during the Trump administration have imposed real costs on American influence (Brands, 2024).

Freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters and airspace represents a third critical American interest, one that is both economic and strategic (Glaser, 2023). The Indo-Pacific's sea lanes carry approximately sixty percent of global maritime trade and more than one-third of global crude oil shipments (US Energy Information Administration, 2024). The United States, as both a major trading nation and the guarantor of the global trading system, has a direct stake in ensuring that these sea lanes remain open and secure. China's construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea, its assertion of sovereignty over waters that international law recognizes as international, and its harassment of vessels operating in these waters represent direct challenges to freedom of navigation that the United States cannot ignore without undermining the legal framework on which the entire maritime order depends (Poling, 2022).

The preservation of the liberal international order, the system of rules, norms, and institutions that the United States built after 1945 and that has governed international relations for the past eight decades represents the broadest and most ambitious of American interests in the Indo-Pacific (Ikenberry, 2018). This order, for all its imperfections and hypocrisies, has provided a framework for international cooperation that has delivered unprecedented prosperity, reduced the frequency and severity of interstate war, and created space for the emergence of democratic governance in countries that had no prior experience with it (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2023). China's challenge to this order, its rejection of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling on the South China Sea, its construction of parallel institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that operate outside Western governance frameworks, its promotion of an alternative model of authoritarian development represents a fundamental challenge to American global influence that extends far beyond the Indo-Pacific (Doshi, 2021).

The economic dimensions of American interests in the Indo-Pacific have grown dramatically over the past three decades. The region accounts for approximately forty percent of global GDP and more than half of global economic growth (Asian Development Bank, 2024). American companies have invested hundreds of billions of dollars in the region, and American exports to the Indo-Pacific support millions of American jobs (US-China Business Council, 2024). The economic interdependence between the United States and the Indo-Pacific particularly with China, which is simultaneously America's most important trading partner and its most significant strategic rival creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities that American policymakers must navigate carefully (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

The Pivot, Rebalance, and Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a Foreign Policy article in November 2011, was the first explicit acknowledgment by an American administration

that the center of gravity of American strategic interests was shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Clinton, 2011). The pivot subsequently rebranded as a "rebalance" to avoid the implication that the United States was abandoning other regions, involved a comprehensive reorientation of American foreign policy across diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions (Campbell & Andrews, 2013). The administration committed to shifting sixty percent of the US Navy's fleet to the Pacific by 2020, deepening security partnerships with regional allies, expanding American participation in regional institutions, and negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership as the economic pillar of the rebalance (The White House, 2015).

The strategic logic underlying the pivot was straightforward: China's rise was the most consequential development in international politics since the end of the Cold War, and the United States needed to position itself to shape the terms of China's integration into the regional and global order (Ratner, 2013). The Obama administration sought to accomplish this through a strategy that combined engagement and hedging, offering China opportunities for cooperation on issues of mutual interest while simultaneously building the military capabilities and alliance relationships that would be necessary if cooperation failed (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012). The approach reflected a recognition that the US-China relationship would be the defining relationship of the twenty-first century, and that getting it right was the most important foreign policy challenge facing the United States (Steinberg & O'Hanlon, 2014).

The pivot's ambitions exceeded its achievements. The reallocation of naval assets to the Pacific proceeded more slowly than announced, constrained by the demands of ongoing operations in the Middle East and the fiscal pressures created by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (O'Hanlon, 2015). The Trans-Pacific Partnership which would have created a free trade area encompassing forty percent of global GDP and established American economic leadership in the region was never ratified by Congress, and was formally withdrawn by the Trump

administration in January 2017 (Fergusson & Williams, 2017). The diplomatic initiatives that were central to the pivot, the expansion of American participation in the East Asia Summit, the deepening of engagement with ASEAN, the negotiation of new defence cooperation agreements achieved in real but limited results, constrained by the structural challenges of multilateral diplomacy and the scepticism of regional states about America's long-term commitment (Shambaugh, 2018).

The Trump administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, unveiled in 2017, represented both continuity and change from the Obama pivot (US Department of State, 2019). The adoption of the "Indo-Pacific" framework which explicitly included India in the regional strategic calculus reflected a recognition that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean constituted a single strategic theatre, and that India's role as a major democratic power was critical to any effective strategy for managing China's rise (Pant & Rej, 2018). The emphasis on "freedom" and "openness" shorthand for freedom of navigation, free trade, and freedom from coercion provided a normative framework that distinguished the American vision from China's more statist, more hierarchical conception of regional order (Medcalf, 2020).

The FOIP strategy was more explicitly focused on China than the Obama pivot had been. Where Obama administration officials had been careful to frame the pivot as being about American engagement with the entire region rather than about containing China, Trump administration officials were more willing to identify China explicitly as a strategic competitor whose behaviour⁹ needed to be constrained (Green, 2022). The 2017 National Security Strategy characterized China as a "revisionist power" seeking to "shape a world antithetical to US values and interests," and subsequent policy documents adopted similarly confrontational language (The White House, 2017). This rhetorical shift reflected a genuine hardening of American attitudes toward China, driven by China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, its military modernization, its economic coercion

of American allies, and its theft of American intellectual property (US Department of Defence, 2018).

The Trump administration's implementation of the FOIP strategy was characterized by significant initiatives in the security domain but persistent weaknesses in the economic sphere. The administration conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea at a higher frequency than its predecessor, challenging Chinese maritime claims and demonstrating American commitment to freedom of navigation (Glaser & Funairole, 2023). It imposed export controls on advanced semiconductors and telecommunications equipment, seeking to deny China access to technologies critical for military modernization and economic development (Cheng, 2022). It designated China as a "strategic competitor" and initiated a trade war that imposed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese goods (Bown, 2021). But it withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, failed to offer a compelling economic vision for American engagement with the region, and alienated allies through its transactional approach to security partnerships and its skepticism of multilateral institutions (Solis, 2020).

The Biden administration inherited the FOIP framework and built upon it with greater institutional sophistication and more consistent alliance management (The White House, 2022). The administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in February 2022, articulated a comprehensive approach organized around five objectives: advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific, building connections within and beyond the region, driving Indo-Pacific prosperity, bolstering Indo-Pacific security, and building regional resilience to transnational threats (The White House, 2022). The strategy emphasized the importance of working with allies and partners, strengthening regional institutions, and competing with China across all dimensions of national power while maintaining open lines of communication to manage the relationship responsibly (Sullivan, 2022).

The Biden administration's most significant initiatives included the revival of the Quad at leaders' level in March 2021, the announcement of AUKUS in September 2021, the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022, and the deepening of bilateral security partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines through new defence cooperation agreements and expanded joint exercises (Campbell & Doshi, 2024). The administration also succeeded in coordinating with European allies on Indo-Pacific issues to a degree that previous administrations had not, persuading NATO to adopt language acknowledging China as a "systemic challenge" and encouraging France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands to develop their own Indo-Pacific strategies (Brzozowski, 2023).

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency in January 2025 introduced new uncertainties about the trajectory of American Indo-Pacific strategy (Ratner & Wright, 2025). Trump's scepticism of multilateral alliances, his transactional approach to security partnerships, and his preference for bilateral deals over multilateral frameworks raised questions about whether the institutional architecture built under Biden; particularly the Quad and IPEF, would be maintained (Brands & Beckley, 2025). The February 2025 US-India Joint Leaders' Statement, which reaffirmed the strategic partnership and committed to expanded defence industrial cooperation under the iCET framework, was a positive signal (US Department of State, 2025). But Trump's threats to impose tariffs on allies, his demands that allies pay more for American security guarantees, and his ambivalent statements about defending Taiwan created genuine uncertainty about American commitment that allies found destabilizing (Panda, 2025).

Military Posture and Alliance Architecture

The United States maintains the most extensive military presence in the Indo-Pacific of any external power, with approximately 375,000 military personnel deployed across the region in 2024 (US Indo-Pacific Command, 2024). This forward presence is organized around

three main components: the Seventh Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan, which is the largest forward-deployed fleet in the US Navy; the Third Marine Expeditionary Force, based primarily in Okinawa; and the network of air bases, logistics facilities, and intelligence installations that extends from Japan and South Korea through Guam and Hawaii to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean (Cancian, 2023).

The alliance architecture that supports this forward presence consists of five formal treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand which is supplemented by strategic partnerships with Singapore, India, and other countries that provide access, logistics support, and interoperability without the binding commitments of formal alliances (Szalwinski, 2023). These alliances are not uniform in their structure or their level of integration: the US-Japan alliance is the most comprehensive and the most deeply institutionalized, involving extensive intelligence sharing, joint operational planning, and the integration of command structures that approaches the level of NATO (Hughes, 2022). The US-South Korea alliance is similarly deep but is focused primarily on the North Korean threat rather than on broader regional security challenges (Cha, 2023). The US-Australia alliance has been transformed over the past two decades from a primarily symbolic relationship into a substantive partnership involving advanced technology sharing, joint facilities, and the AUKUS submarine program (Blaxland & Tsang, 2023).

The US-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of American military posture in the Indo-Pacific. Japan hosts approximately 54,000 American military personnel — the largest US military presence in any foreign country — across more than 120 installations, including major air and naval bases that provide the infrastructure for American power projection across the Western Pacific (US Forces Japan, 2024). The alliance has been strengthened significantly over the past decade through the revision of the US-Japan Defence Guidelines in 2015, which expanded the scope of security cooperation to include collective self-defence and contingencies beyond Japanese territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015). Japan's decision in December 2022 to

adopt a new National Security Strategy that commits to doubling defence spending to two percent of GDP by 2027, acquiring counterstrike capabilities, and taking a more active role in regional security represents the most significant evolution in Japanese security policy since the end of the Cold War (Government of Japan, 2022).

The US-South Korea alliance, formalized in the Mutual Defence Treaty of 1953, maintains approximately 28,500 American troops on the Korean Peninsula and conducts some of the most sophisticated joint military exercises in the world (US Forces Korea, 2024). The alliance has been tested repeatedly by North Korean provocations including nuclear tests, ballistic missile launches, and conventional military attacks and by periodic tensions over burden-sharing, operational control, and the scope of the alliance's mission (Snyder, 2023). The Biden administration's efforts to expand the alliance's focus beyond the Korean Peninsula to include broader regional security issues including coordination with Japan through the trilateral US-Japan-South Korea framework have been partially successful but remain constrained by South Korea's economic dependence on China and domestic political sensitivities about being drawn into US-China competition (Klingner, 2024).

The US-Australia alliance, formalized in the ANZUS Treaty of 1951, has been transformed over the past two decades into one of the most consequential security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific (Department of Defence (Australia), 2023). The 2014 Force Posture Agreement established a rotational deployment of up to 2,500 US Marines to Darwin in northern Australia, providing the United States with a strategic foothold in the eastern Indian Ocean (US Department of Defence, 2014). The AUKUS agreement announced in September 2021 under which the United States and United Kingdom committed to helping Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines represented the most significant expansion of the alliance since its founding, involving the transfer of some of America's most sensitive military technology to a close ally (The White House, 2021). The "optimal pathway" announced in March 2023 envisions Australia eventually

operating a fleet of eight SSN-AUKUS submarines, a new class of attack submarine to be jointly developed by the three countries — that would give the Royal Australian Navy capabilities rivalling those of the most advanced navies in the world (The White House, 2023).

The US-Philippines alliance, formalized in the Mutual Defence Treaty of 1951, has experienced significant volatility over the past decade, reflecting the domestic political turbulence in the Philippines and the complicated legacy of American colonialism (Heydarian, 2023). The Duterte administration (2016-2022) pursued a policy of distancing the Philippines from the United States and accommodating China, threatening to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement and declining to invoke the Mutual Defence Treaty in response to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea (Baviera, 2021). The Marcos Jr. administration, which took office in June 2022, reversed this trajectory, reaffirming the alliance, expanding American access to Philippine military bases under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, and taking a more assertive position in the South China Sea disputes (Parameswaran, 2023). By 2024, the United States had access to nine bases in the Philippines under EDCA, including sites on Luzon that provide strategic access to the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea (US Department of Defence, 2024).

The American military posture in the Indo-Pacific has been evolving in response to China's military modernization and the erosion of the comfortable military superiority that the United States enjoyed in the region for decades (Krepinevich, 2015). China's development of advanced anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities — including the DF-21D and DF-26 anti-ship ballistic missiles, advanced submarines, and integrated air defence systems — has made American bases and carrier strike groups increasingly vulnerable to Chinese attack (Cliff et al., 2023). American military planners have responded with a series of operational concepts designed to operate effectively in a contested environment: Air-Sea Battle (later renamed Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons), the Third Offset Strategy, and most recently Agile Combat Employment, which

emphasizes distributed operations from multiple locations to complicate Chinese targeting (Gunzinger & Clark, 2023).

The establishment of the US Space Force in December 2019 and the elevation of cyber operations to a central role in military planning reflect the recognition that future conflicts in the Indo-Pacific will be fought across multiple domains simultaneously (Harrison et al., 2023). The integration of space-based surveillance, cyber capabilities, and conventional military power into a unified operational concept what the Pentagon calls "Joint All-Domain Command and Control" is intended to provide the United States with decision-making speed and operational flexibility that can offset China's growing conventional capabilities (US Department of Defence, 2023). But the implementation of these concepts remains a work in progress, constrained by bureaucratic inertia, inter-service rivalries, and the technical challenges of integrating systems that were designed to operate independently (Ochmanek, 2023).

Economic Engagement and the Challenge of Chinese Influence

The United States' economic engagement with the Indo-Pacific has been the persistent weakness in its regional strategy, a gap between strategic ambitions and policy implementation that has undermined American influence and created opportunities for China to expand its economic footprint (Solis, 2023). The withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in January 2017 one of the first acts of the Trump administration was widely recognized as a strategic mistake that eliminated the most significant American economic initiative in the region and signalled to regional partners that the United States was retreating from economic leadership (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

The TPP, negotiated by the Obama administration and signed by twelve countries in February 2016, would have created a free trade area encompassing forty percent of global GDP and established high standards for labour rights, environmental protection, intellectual property, and state-owned enterprises that would have served as a counterweight to China's state-led economic model (Schott et al.,

2016). The agreement was explicitly designed as the economic pillar of the pivot to Asia, providing the market access and trade liberalization that regional partners wanted while advancing American strategic interests in establishing rules and norms that would shape the regional economic order (Fergusson, 2015). Its abandonment by the United States while the remaining eleven parties proceeded with a modified version called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership — was a self-inflicted wound that diminished American credibility and influence (Lim et al., 2020).

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched by the Biden administration in May 2022 with fourteen founding members, was designed as a partial substitute for the TPP, but its limitations were apparent from the outset (The White House, 2022). Unlike a traditional free trade agreement, IPEF does not provide market access commitments, it does not offer the tariff reductions and preferential access that have been the traditional inducements for countries to join trade agreements (Goodman & Reinsch, 2023). Instead, it is organized around four pillars — trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy — that emphasize regulatory harmonization, digital trade standards, supply chain resilience, and anti-corruption measures (Bown & Hillman, 2023). These are worthwhile objectives, but they do not address the fundamental economic interests of developing countries in the region, which are primarily focused on gaining access to the large American market (Kausikan, 2023).

The political constraints that prevent the United States from offering market access reflect the deep scepticism about trade agreements that has emerged in American domestic politics over the past two decades (Irwin, 2020). Both major political parties have moved away from the trade liberalization consensus that characterized American policy from the 1990s through the early 2010s, reflecting concerns about job losses in manufacturing, growing inequality, and the perception that trade agreements benefit corporations and elites at the expense of workers (Autor et al., 2020). This domestic political reality limits the economic tools available to American policymakers for competing with China in

the Indo-Pacific, where China's willingness to offer market access, infrastructure investment, and development assistance gives it significant advantages (Scissors, 2023).

China's economic engagement with the Indo-Pacific has been comprehensive and strategically directed. The Belt and Road Initiative, announced in 2013, has invested hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure across Asia, Africa, and beyond, creating economic dependencies and political influence that no American initiative has matched (Hillman, 2021). China is the largest trading partner for most countries in the Indo-Pacific, including American allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and this economic leverage has been used increasingly for political purposes (Lim & Cooper, 2023). China's economic coercion of Australia following Canberra's call for an independent COVID-19 inquiry — involving restrictions on Australian barley, wine, coal, and other exports — demonstrated both China's willingness to weaponize economic interdependence and the costs that countries face when they challenge Chinese interests (Medcalf & Thomas-Noone, 2021).

The United States has sought to counter Chinese economic influence through several mechanisms. The BUILD Act of 2018 established the US International Development Finance Corporation with \$60 billion in investment capacity, providing an alternative to Chinese financing for infrastructure projects in developing countries (US International Development Finance Corporation, 2024). The Blue Dot Network, announced in 2019 as a partnership between the United States, Japan, and Australia, was designed to certify quality infrastructure projects that meet high standards for transparency, sustainability, and governance (US Department of State, 2019). The Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, announced at the G7 Summit in 2022, committed to mobilizing \$600 billion in infrastructure investment over five years (The White House, 2022). But the scale of these initiatives remains far smaller than China's Belt and Road Initiative, and their implementation has been slower and less visible (Hillman & Tippet, 2023).

The technology competition between the United States and China has emerged as one of the most consequential dimensions of economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The United States has imposed increasingly stringent export controls on advanced semiconductors, semiconductor manufacturing equipment, and artificial intelligence technologies, seeking to deny China access to the technologies essential for military modernization and economic development (Khan & Mann, 2023). The October 2022 export controls — which restricted Chinese access to advanced chips and the equipment needed to manufacture them — represented the most aggressive use of technology restrictions since the Cold War (US Department of Commerce, 2022). These controls have been partially successful in slowing China's progress in advanced semiconductors, but they have also imposed costs on American companies, created tensions with allies whose companies are affected by the restrictions, and accelerated China's efforts to achieve technological self-sufficiency (Allen, 2023).

Domestic Politics and the Sustainability of American Commitment

The sustainability of American Indo-Pacific commitments is ultimately a domestic political question, and the domestic political environment in the United States is more uncertain and more polarized than at any point since the end of the Cold War (Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2021). The bipartisan consensus on American global leadership that characterized the Cold War era and the immediate post-Cold War period has fractured, replaced by a more contested debate about the costs and benefits of American engagement abroad, the appropriate level of defence spending, and the priority that should be given to domestic challenges versus international commitments (Smeltz et al., 2023).

The rise of a more nationalist, "America First" strain of politics — represented most powerfully by Donald Trump but reflecting deeper currents in American political culture — has introduced genuine uncertainty about whether the United States will maintain the level of

commitment to its Indo-Pacific partnerships that its allies require (Brands, 2022). Trump's skepticism of alliances, his transactional approach to security relationships, and his explicit questioning of whether the United States should defend Taiwan or other allies unless they pay more for American protection have undermined the credibility of American commitments in ways that will be difficult to repair (Cha, 2024). The fact that Trump was elected twice — in 2016 and 2024 — suggests that his views reflect significant currents in American public opinion rather than being merely idiosyncratic positions of a single political figure (Norris, 2023).

Public opinion polling reveals a more complex picture than the polarization of elite debate might suggest. Surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the Pew Research Center, and other organizations consistently show that majorities of Americans support maintaining alliances, view China as a threat, and favour an active American role in world affairs (Smeltz et al., 2024). But these majorities are not overwhelming, and they vary significantly by political party, with Republicans more skeptical of alliances and international institutions than Democrats, and Democrats more concerned about climate change and human rights than Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2024). The generational divide is also significant: younger Americans are less supportive of maintaining a large military presence abroad and more focused on domestic priorities than older Americans who came of age during the Cold War (Drezner et al., 2023).

The fiscal pressures facing the United States represent another constraint on the sustainability of American Indo-Pacific commitments. The federal government's debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 120 percent in 2024, and the Congressional Budget Office projects that it will continue to rise in the absence of significant policy changes (Congressional Budget Office, 2024). The combination of an aging population, rising healthcare costs, and the political difficulty of raising taxes or cutting entitlement programs creates a fiscal environment in which defence spending faces increasing pressure

(Gholz & Press, 2023). The defence budget reached approximately \$850 billion in fiscal year 2024, but even this historically high level of spending has been judged insufficient by military planners who argue that the demands of competing with China while maintaining commitments in Europe and the Middle East require sustained real growth in defence spending for decades (US Department of Defence, 2024).

The debate over defence priorities within the United States has significant implications for Indo-Pacific strategy. Some analysts argue for a strategy of "restraint" that would reduce American military commitments abroad, shift more of the burden of regional security to allies, and focus American resources on domestic renewal (Posen, 2014). Others argue for "selective engagement" that would prioritize the Indo-Pacific over other regions, accepting reduced commitments in Europe and the Middle East in order to concentrate resources on the China challenge (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). Still others advocate for maintaining American commitments across all regions, arguing that American credibility is indivisible and that any retreat in one theatre would undermine American influence globally (Kagan, 2024). The outcome of this debate will shape American Indo-Pacific strategy for decades to come.

The China challenge has generated a degree of bipartisan consensus that is rare in contemporary American politics. Both Democrats and Republicans view China as a strategic competitor, support maintaining a strong military posture in the Indo-Pacific, and favour restrictions on Chinese access to advanced technologies (Silver et al., 2024). But this consensus is narrower than it appears: it focuses primarily on security and technology issues, while significant disagreements remain about trade policy, human rights, climate cooperation, and the appropriate level of engagement with China (Smeltz et al., 2023). The consensus is also potentially fragile, vulnerable to being undermined by economic shocks, military crises, or domestic political developments that shift priorities (Friedberg, 2022).

The alliance management challenges that the United States faces in the Indo-Pacific are compounded by the uncertainty about American domestic politics. When allies are uncertain about the durability of American commitment. When they cannot be confident that the policies of one administration will be maintained by its successor they hedge their bets, maintaining relationships with China that they might otherwise be willing to sacrifice in exchange for more reliable American security guarantees (Schweller, 2018). This hedging, in turn, frustrates American policymakers who interpret it as evidence of allies' unwillingness to fully commit to the American strategic vision, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic in which American uncertainty generates allied hedging, which generates American frustration, which generates further allied hedging (Cha, 2016).

India's position in this dynamic is particularly complex. India is not a formal treaty ally of the United States, and the security guarantees that Washington provides to Japan, South Korea, and Australia do not extend to India (Pant & Rej, 2021). However, India's commitment to strategic autonomy also does not require such security extension. This asymmetry means that in a crisis scenario involving China, India cannot count on automatic American military support, and the United States cannot count on India's military participation in operations that do not directly threaten Indian territory (Tellis, 2023). India's continued purchase of Russian military equipment, particularly the S-400 air defence system, remains a persistent irritant in the relationship, creating legal complications under the CAATSA legislation and raising questions about the depth of the strategic partnership (Hoyt, 2023). India's position on the Russia-Ukraine war and maintaining economic ties with Moscow, declining to condemn Russian aggression in UN votes, and continuing to purchase Russian energy at discounted prices has tested American patience, even as Washington has recognized that India's strategic importance makes punitive measures counterproductive (Pant, 2023).

The future trajectory of American Indo-Pacific strategy will depend on the interaction of several variables: the evolution of the China

challenge, the outcomes of American domestic political contests, the willingness of allies to share the burden of regional security, and the ability of American policymakers to sustain public support for sustained engagement in a region that most Americans know little about (Ratner, 2024). The optimistic scenario is one in which the China challenge generates sufficient domestic consensus to sustain American commitment, allies step up to share more of the burden, and the institutional architecture built over the past decade, the Quad, AUKUS, IPEF, and strengthened bilateral alliances proves durable enough to weather changes in administration (Campbell, 2024). The pessimistic scenario is one in which domestic political divisions, fiscal pressures, and alliance management failures combine to produce a gradual American retrenchment that leaves the Indo-Pacific increasingly dominated by Chinese power (Mearsheimer, 2024). The most likely outcome lies between these extremes: a United States that remains engaged in the Indo-Pacific but with less consistency, less generosity, and more explicit demands that allies contribute more to their own defence and to the collective security of the region (Beckley & Brands, 2024).

Chapter- 5

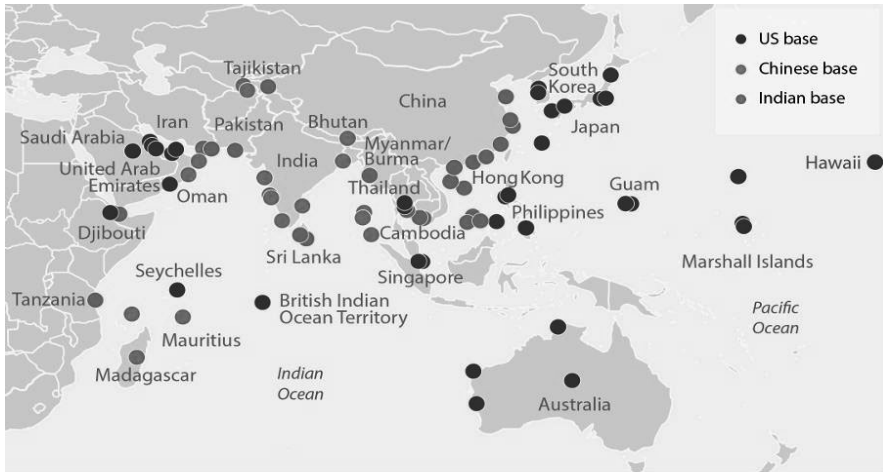
Indo-Pacific Region: Geo-Political Contestation Among Global And Regional Players

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW OF INDO PACIFIC REGION

The Indo-Pacific region is home to a substantial portion of the world's population, estimated to be around 60%. This region encompasses countries from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, including a vast area of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and also accounts for over 40% of global GDP, contributing nearly two-thirds of global GDP growth (Centre for Geopolitics, 2025; Cambridge University, 2024). The region connects the Indian Ocean, home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies, with the Asia-Pacific, making it a zone of tremendous geostrategic importance. Because of its disputed borders, the Indo-Pacific region is facing increasing strategic challenges. Furthermore, it is home to three of the world's largest economies (China, India and Japan), as well as seven of the world's largest military forces. The United States (US) has voiced concerns about the area in recent years due to China's growing military might, pointing out that the South China Sea is where one-third of all international shipping passes. With the second-highest military spending in the Indo-Pacific region and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, India has proven essential to US efforts to

thwart China's rise. In this regard, the three most significant strategic actors in the area are China, the United States, and India.

Figure 5.1 –United States, Indian and Chinese military bases (including China's Belt and Road ports) in the Indo-Pacific



Source: EPRS, based on Aubry and Tétart; Graphic: Györgi Macsai.

A critical aspect of the Indo-Pacific's strategic importance lies in its routes and resources, which facilitate the majority of the world's maritime oil trade and nearly one-third of total worldwide trade. These routes connect the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the United States, and their crucial passage points, if obstructed, could bring the global economy to a standstill. The Indo-Pacific region has also become one of the most crucial geopolitical arenas in the 21st century, primarily due to its abundance of natural resources, critical maritime routes, and the rising influence of key global powers. Spanning from the east coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, the region includes major actors such as China, India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Central to Indo-Pacific geopolitics is the competition for control over essential resources like energy reserves, rare earth elements, fisheries, freshwater, and strategically important territories. These resources are vital not only for economic growth but also act as factors of regional tensions, military strategies, and alliances. Competition for acquiring control

over the limited resources, compels nations for strategic choices, alliances, and conflicts to fulfil national Interests. This underscores a critical dynamic: economic prosperity and security are inextricably linked in the Indo-Pacific. The geopolitical contestation in the region is not solely about military power projection or territorial claims, but fundamentally about controlling and securing these economic lifelines i.e routes and resources and shaping the rules governing trade and connectivity. Economic vulnerabilities can quickly escalate into security flashpoints, and conversely, security guarantees are prerequisites for sustained economic development.

The region is also characterized by numerous geopolitical flashpoints, including the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the India-Pakistan border, which contribute to its strategic volatility. The power narrative within the Indo-Pacific involves a complex interplay of interests among major powers like China, India, Japan, and the United States, as well as regional players such as Australia, South Korea, and the Southeast Asian nations. External stakeholders, including European nations like UK, Germany and France, are also increasingly asserting their presence through Indo-Pacific-oriented foreign policies.

China's increasing assertiveness is a primary driver of regional shifts. This is evident through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), extensive territorial claims, the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and its assertive "wolf-warrior diplomacy". Beijing's strategy integrates economic, diplomatic, and military elements, including purposeful investments in ports across the Indian Ocean that could potentially serve dual-use (commercial and military) purposes, allowing for strategic encirclement of string of pearls towards India. China possesses the world's largest navy, with 355 vessels, projected⁶ to expand to 460 by 2030. The United States perceives China as leveraging its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological capabilities to establish a "sphere of influence" in the Indo-Pacific, explicitly aiming to counter this expansion through its Indo-Pacific

Strategy and inclusion of India in this strategy is imperative to counter unprecedented rise of China .

Australia, facing a rapidly evolving strategic environment marked by deepening geopolitical fault lines, is enhancing military cooperation with key allies like the US Japan and United Kingdom through partnerships such as AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Smith & Australian Government, 2023). This illustrates a paradox: despite a diversifying power landscape, the response to perceived threats often leads to the consolidation of power into blocs. This dynamic could potentially steer the region towards a more bipolar or block-based confrontation rather than a truly distributed, cooperative multipolar order. Now let discuss the key Global and regional players strategies and Approach in Indo Pacific

CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Strategic Objectives and Framework

China's Indo-Pacific strategy is shaped by a combination of economic, diplomatic, and military imperatives operating at both the international and regional levels. At the regional level, Beijing has invested in strategically located "strongpoints" close to its own borders and in neighbouring states, including India. The 2004 Booz Allen Hamilton report famously characterised this approach as the "String of Pearls" strategy, describing it as an effort to expand China's naval reach through civilian maritime infrastructure with dual-use potential. Under President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has accelerated this strategy, enabling China to invest in and operate a network of ports across the Indian Ocean that can be adapted for military use.

The logic behind this infrastructure development is twofold. First, it provides Beijing with logistical hubs that could support PLAN operations far from home waters. Second, it offers leverage over host nations through debt dependency or long-term lease agreements,

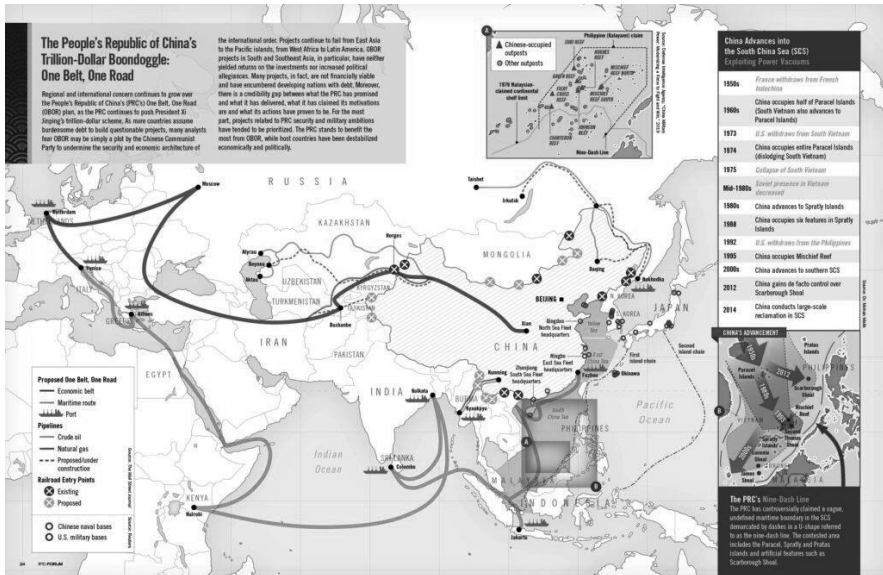
potentially influencing their diplomatic alignment on issues such as Taiwan or the South China Sea.

Maritime Infrastructure and Strategic Bases of China

Beijing's port acquisitions span critical maritime chokepoints and regional theatres. In South Asia, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port offers China a position in the Bay of Bengal close to the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, providing an alternative route that circumvents the Strait of Malacca. Although Colombo has officially denied military use rights to China, a PLAN vessel docked there in August 2022, raising Indian concerns. In Pakistan, Gwadar Port's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz positions it near one of the world's most vital oil transit routes. Operated by the Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), the port's legal framework reportedly obliges it to support PLA operations upon request. Alongside Gwadar, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has included direct Chinese investment in Karachi Port Trust, potentially enabling expansion for larger vessels.

To the east, Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar—developed under a 50-year concession—provides Beijing with Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea access, further bypassing Malacca. Southeast Asia features prominently in China's base network, with the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia reportedly subject to a covert agreement granting Beijing exclusive use. Laem Chabang Port in Thailand, expanded through a Sino–Thai partnership, is linked to the China–Laos–Thailand railway network and is expected to offer enhanced logistical capacity by 2028.

Figure 5.2 China's One Belt and One Road



Source: Indo-Pacific Defence Forum;

<https://ipdefenceforum.com/2020/03/countering-chinas-maritime-ambitions/>

Beyond the South and Southeast Asian theatres, Beijing has invested in the Port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, strategically located near the Mozambique Channel, and established its first acknowledged overseas military base in Djibouti. While China refers to it as a “logistics facility,” Western analysts regard it as a fully capable naval base situated near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical gateway to the Suez Canal and major oil markets.

Naval Capabilities and Limitations

China's naval modernisation has produced the world's largest fleet of surface combatants, supported by an expanding submarine arm. Since 2013, PLAN submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean have increased, though precise basing patterns remain unclear. Estimates suggest China operates 58 submarines, but the shallow waters of the Strait of Malacca make undetected transit challenging for both conventional and nuclear-powered boats. These geographic constraints remain a tactical disadvantage for Beijing.

Moreover, while many BRI-linked ports could theoretically host PLAN vessels, not all possess the necessary infrastructure—such as deep-water berths, heavy cargo ramps, and secure storage facilities—for sustained military operations. The 2015 Chinese defence white paper formalised the doctrine of civilian–military integration, underscoring the strategic intention to keep such dual-use capacities embedded within commercial ventures. This ambiguity complicates regional threat assessments, allowing China to expand influence without overtly militarising its investments.

INDIA’S STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Strategic Context and Geopolitical Positioning

India’s geopolitical posture in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by its unique geography, bordering eight countries and flanked by the Indian Ocean to the south, the Arabian Sea to the southwest, and the Bay of Bengal to the southeast. Its location grants it both opportunities for maritime power projection and vulnerabilities to regional threats. Historically, India’s primary security concerns have been land-based, centred on territorial disputes with Pakistan and China. However, the rise of China’s maritime influence in the Indian Ocean—exemplified by the expansion of the BRI and the “String of Pearls”—has compelled New Delhi to recalibrate its strategic priorities towards the maritime domain.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s *Neighbourhood First* policy reflects this recalibration, aiming to strengthen relations with immediate neighbours while extending India’s strategic influence across the Indian Ocean Rim. India’s island territories, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, provide forward positions that can monitor and influence shipping lanes, particularly near the Strait of Malacca.

Strategic Concerns and the Chinese Challenge

Sino–Indian relations have historically been strained due to unresolved border disputes, most prominently in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. In recent years, Chinese naval deployments in the Indian

Ocean, combined with the consolidation of China–Pakistan relations via CPEC, have intensified New Delhi’s apprehensions. The 2017 transfer of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka to Chinese control, under a 99-year lease, heightened Indian fears of encirclement.

India is also wary of China’s deepening engagements with island nations in its maritime neighbourhood, including the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. Such partnerships could facilitate Chinese access to maritime choke points and undermine India’s traditional sphere of influence.

India’s Counterstrategy: The Necklace of Diamonds

In response to the perceived encirclement of the “String of Pearls,” India has developed its own counter-concept, often referred to as the “Necklace of Diamonds.” First articulated by former Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansing in 2011, the strategy seeks to build a network of cooperative security arrangements and forward-operating access points throughout the Indian Ocean, enabling India to maintain strategic depth and deterrence.

One such initiative was the 2015 agreement with Seychelles, granting India access to Assumption Island for military purposes, later revised in 2018 to permit infrastructure development. Similarly, an agreement with Mauritius provides India with access to Agaléga Island, where it is constructing a runway and jetty. These facilities extend India’s reach into the southwestern Indian Ocean, enabling monitoring of traffic through the Mozambique Channel.

India has also secured access to Sabang Port in Indonesia, located at the northern entrance to the Strait of Malacca, and to Singapore’s Changi Naval Base at the strait’s eastern exit. In Oman, India has gained use of the Port of Duqm, strategically positioned near the Strait of Hormuz, while its investment in Iran’s Chabahar Port offers a land bridge to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

Partnerships and Multilateral Engagement

India's Indo-Pacific vision aligns closely with that of key partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) provides a multilateral platform for security cooperation, joint naval exercises, and coordination on infrastructure investment. India's joint strategic vision with the United States, issued in 2015, underscored the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific.

Beyond QUAD, India has cultivated security partnerships with ASEAN states, recognising Southeast Asia as vital to its "Act East" policy. It has also developed reciprocal logistics agreements, such as the 2020 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with Japan, which enables mutual supply of fuel, ammunition, and other support.

A noteworthy addition to India's maritime strategy is the establishment of a listening post in Madagascar, enhancing its maritime domain awareness and capacity to intercept communications across the Western Indian Ocean.

Military Capabilities and Budgetary Trends

India's military spending, while increasing in absolute terms, has remained steady as a percentage of GDP, at approximately 2.7% in 2021—the same proportion as in 2011. In 2022, India was the world's fourth-largest military spender, allocating US\$81.4 billion to defence. The Indian Army absorbs the largest share of the defence budget, though recent allocations suggest a shift towards naval modernisation, rising from 14% in 2021–2022 to 20% in 2023–2024.

Naval procurement priorities include the completion of new aircraft carriers, destroyers, and helicopters. However, analysts highlight a persistent weakness in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities, a critical gap given China's growing submarine deployments in the region.

Strategic Infrastructure Development

Domestically, India has approved the development of Vadhavan Port in Maharashtra, leveraging its natural deep-water advantages to expand import–export capacity. In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Galathea Bay is being developed as an International Container Transshipment Terminal, capitalising on its strategic location near the Malacca Strait.

India’s capacity to project maritime power thus rests on a combination of forward-deployed partnerships, growing naval capability, and infrastructural expansion. Yet, as with China, the feasibility of converting commercial ports into fully operational naval facilities remains a limiting factor, particularly when constrained by host-nation politics or physical infrastructure gaps.

THE UNITED STATES’ STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Strategic Foundations and Historical Context

Since the conclusion of World War II, the United States Navy (USN) has maintained a position of pre-eminence in global maritime power. Its dominance was not only a function of the number of vessels but also of their size, capability, and global reach. By 2019, however, the growth of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in absolute hull numbers led analysts to note that China had surpassed the USN in terms of the number of warships. Nevertheless, the USN retained a decisive advantage in total fleet tonnage—approximately 4.6 million tonnes compared to China’s 1.8 million tonnes—and in qualitative dimensions such as aircraft carrier-based air power, long-range attack submarines, and integrated strike capabilities.⁹

Fleet size alone does not determine maritime dominance; operational effectiveness, technological sophistication, and alliance networks play equally significant roles. The USN’s carrier strike groups, for instance, possess power projection capabilities that remain unmatched in the Indo-Pacific, while its fleet of nuclear-powered submarines grants it sustained underwater endurance and global strike reach. These

capabilities, when combined with a long-established network of overseas bases and mutual defence treaties, underpin Washington's deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific.

Strategic Perceptions of China and Regional Competition

From Washington's perspective, the rise of China represents the emergence of a systemic competitor capable of challenging US interests both regionally and globally. China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, militarisation of artificial islands, and coercive economic diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are viewed as direct threats to both US allies and the liberal international order. Consequently, China has featured prominently in the US National Security Strategy, Indo-Pacific Strategy, and NATO's Strategic Concept as a pacing challenge.

The Biden administration has articulated a five-pillar Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at:

1. Promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific,
2. Strengthening connectivity within and beyond the region,
3. Driving shared prosperity,
4. Bolstering security, and
5. Building regional resilience (White House, 2022).

The strategy emphasises multilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) trilateral partnership, while also reinforcing bilateral security ties with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

MILITARY POSTURE: INTEGRATED DETERRENCE

The US Indo-Pacific military strategy is grounded in the concept of *integrated deterrence*, wherein military, economic, diplomatic, and technological tools are synchronised to prevent aggression. A critical element of this approach is the forward deployment of approximately

60% of USN surface ships to the Indo-Pacific theatre, encompassing around 200 ships and 1,500 aircraft. This distribution ensures not only the protection of major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) but also the credibility of extended deterrence commitments to allies.

A focal point of US deterrence is Taiwan. While the United States has long adhered to a policy of “strategic ambiguity” under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, President Biden has, on multiple occasions since 2021, stated that the US would defend Taiwan if attacked, though official spokespeople have reiterated that the formal policy remains unchanged.

The US Defence Network in the Indo-Pacific

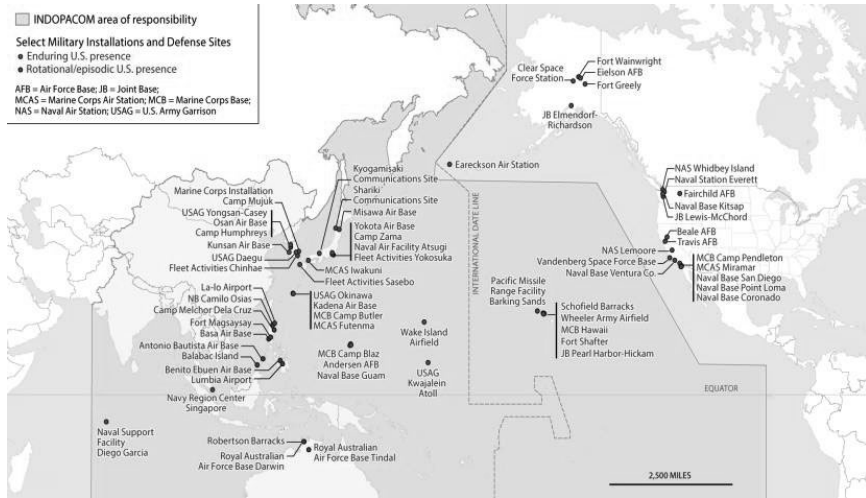
The strength of the US position in the Indo-Pacific rests heavily on its extensive network of military bases and access agreements (Figure 5.1). These facilities are geographically distributed to enable rapid response to contingencies and maintain strategic pressure on potential adversaries.

KEY US BASES AND ACCESS POINTS INCLUDE:

1. **DIEGO GARCIA, BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY** – Functions as a critical logistics and naval support hub, centrally located in the Indian Ocean. The island also hosts long-range bomber aircraft and supports surveillance over the Mozambique Channel.
2. **DJIBOUTI NAVAL BASE** – Provides control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.
3. **PERSIAN GULF AND ARABIAN SEA BASES** – Includes airbases in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, as well as naval support facilities in Bahrain. These installations enable close monitoring of the Strait of Hormuz.

4. **SINGAPORE (CHANGI NAVAL BASE)** – A vital foothold near the Strait of Malacca, allowing the US to project power into both the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.
5. **THAILAND (SATTAHIP AND U-TAPAO)** – Historically used for logistics during Middle East conflicts; access arrangements continue.
6. **PHILIPPINES** – Under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty and 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the US has access to multiple air and naval bases, including four additional facilities granted in 2023. These are strategically critical for South China Sea operations.
7. **GUAM** – One of the largest US Pacific bases, hosting nuclear-capable bombers and submarines. It serves as the hub of the US Second Island Chain strategy.
8. **JAPAN (OKINAWA AND OTHER BASES)** – Hosting approximately 36,500 US personnel, Okinawa is within striking distance of Taiwan and the East China Sea, serving as a linchpin of the First Island Chain.
9. **SOUTH KOREA** – Home to the largest overseas US military bases, deterring both North Korean aggression and Chinese assertiveness.
10. **AUSTRALIA** – Hosts US air and naval facilities, including plans to station nuclear-capable B-52 bombers, enhancing surveillance and anti-ship capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

Figure 5.3: US Defence Sites in the Indo-Pacific



Source: CRS/US DoD

This network not only enables rapid force deployment but also creates overlapping fields of influence, ensuring that US and allied forces can operate across key maritime choke points.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

The United States' principal strength lies in its enduring alliance network and forward-deployed force structure. By combining its own capabilities with those of allies—such as Japan's maritime self-defence force, Australia's submarine fleet, and India's growing naval presence—the US can maintain qualitative dominance over the PLAN, particularly in the western Pacific.

The US also benefits from a powerful domestic defence industry, capable of rapid technological innovation and sustainment of global military operations. Deployments of B-52 nuclear-capable aircraft to Australia, Guam, and South Korea further extend its deterrence umbrella.

However, weaknesses remain. Chinese submarines enjoy greater operational freedom in the Indian Ocean, where the US presence is

concentrated in the Arabian Sea and Australia's northwest. Furthermore, while the US retains an advantage in many areas of military technology, China's rapid innovation—especially in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems—poses a growing challenge.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC POSTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Strategic Orientation and Policy Evolution

The European Union (EU) has traditionally been viewed as a primarily economic actor in global affairs. However, in the last decade, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a focal point for its external relations, reflecting both the region's economic dynamism and its increasing geopolitical volatility. Three EU Member States—France, Germany, and the Netherlands—have published dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies, each tailored to their own national interests but aligned with broader EU objectives.

In April 2021, the European Council adopted conclusions on an *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, emphasising the region's strategic importance for global stability, prosperity, and the preservation of a rules-based order.¹⁰ The document framed the Indo-Pacific as both a region of opportunity and a theatre of strategic competition, identifying China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival—a formulation echoing the 2019 *EU-China Strategic Outlook*.

The strategy was later complemented by the **2022 STRATEGIC COMPASS**, which presented the Indo-Pacific as a priority theatre for EU security engagement. The Compass called for strengthening partnerships with like-minded regional powers, safeguarding key maritime chokepoints, and ensuring freedom of navigation.

Security and Defence Instruments

While the EU lacks a standing military comparable to that of the US, it leverages a combination of **MEMBER STATE NAVAL**

DEPLOYMENTS, capacity-building missions, and cooperative security platforms.

Key initiatives include:

1. **Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO)** – An EU programme to enhance maritime domain awareness, particularly in the western Indian Ocean, through capacity building and information sharing.
2. **INDO-PACIFIC REGIONAL INFORMATION SHARING (IORIS) PLATFORM** – Supports partner states like the Philippines in improving operational effectiveness across coast guards and navies.
3. **ENHANCING SECURITY COOPERATION IN AND WITH ASIA (ESIWA)** – Expands EU engagement on maritime security, counter-terrorism, and crisis management.

The EU's maritime security strategy prioritises the **STRAIT OF MALACCA**, **STRAIT OF HORMUZ**, and **BAB EL-MANDEB** as essential nodes for global trade. The strategic approach involves **ROTATIONAL NAVAL DEPLOYMENTS** by Member States, joint exercises, and coordination with ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and QUAD partners.

Member State Contributions

France remains the EU's most militarily active state in the Indo-Pacific, with **7,000 PERSONNEL**, **20 VESSELS**, AND **40 AIRCRAFT** permanently stationed across its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. French naval assets operate regularly in the Bay of Bengal, South China Sea, and the Mozambique Channel, while the Charles de Gaulle carrier strike group frequently conducts joint exercises with regional partners such as India and Australia.

Germany's engagement, while more recent, has been symbolically significant. The deployment of the frigate *Bayern* to the Indo-Pacific in 2021–2022 signalled Berlin's readiness to uphold freedom of

navigation and a rules-based order. Germany has also sent Eurofighter jets, transport aircraft, and refuelling tankers to participate in joint exercises in Australia.

The Netherlands has contributed via deployments like the frigate *Evertsen*, which in 2021 visited Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, integrating with NATO’s maritime presence in the region.

Strengths and Constraints

The EU’s strength lies in its **ECONOMIC LEVERAGE** and its **DIPLOMATIC NETWORK**, which can complement military efforts by shaping norms and providing development assistance. However, the absence of a unified EU military command in the Indo-Pacific limits rapid-response capabilities. Instead, the EU relies on its Member States—chiefly France—for sustained naval presence.

The EU’s growing security role in the Indo-Pacific is also shaped by its willingness to integrate **SPACE-BASED ASSETS** into maritime surveillance. The EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence aims to enhance situational awareness and secure communications for missions in the region.

Table 5.1: Comparative Military Capabilities in the Indo-Pacific (Approximate figures, 2023)

ACTOR	SURFACE COMBATANTS	SUBMARINES	AIRCR AFT (COMBAT & PATROL)	OVERSEAS / REGIONAL BASES IN INDO-PACIFIC	KEY STRENGTHS
INDIA	~150	16 (nuclear & diesel)	~200	Seychelles, Agaléga (Mauritius), Duqm (Oman), Chabahar (Iran), Sabang (Indonesia), Changi	Strategic geography, necklace of diamonds strategy, QUAD member

				(Singapore), Madagascar	
UNITED STATES	~290	68 (all nuclear)	~3,700	Japan, Guam, Philippines, Singapore, Diego Garcia, Australia, South Korea, Bahrain, Djibouti	Carrier strike groups, extensive base network, alliance structure
EU (ACTIVE MEMBER STATES)	~25 (France, UK)	8	~150	Réunion, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Polynesia, rotational deployments	Economic leverage, diplomatic influence, niche high-end deployments
AUSTRALIA	~50 (destroyers, frigates, OPVs)	6 (diesel-electric)	~140	Darwin, Stirling (Perth), Cocos (Keeling Islands), US access under AUKUS	Interoperability with US, chokepoint geography, SSN acquisition plans
JAPAN (MSDF)	~70 (destroyers, frigates, helicopter carriers)	22 (diesel-electric)	~350	Yokosuka, Sasebo, Kure, Okinawa; US-Japan joint facilities	Advanced Aegis fleet, strong ASW, US treaty ally
South Korea (ROKN)	~40 (destroyers, frigates, corvettes)	23 (diesel-electric)	~250	Overseas anti-piracy rotation (Gulf of Aden); close coordination with US bases	Technologically advanced fleet, strong shipbuilding, missile defence
Asean (combined estimate)	~85 (major combatants across ASEAN)	~18 (mostly diesel-electric)	~220	Singapore (Changi, Tuas), Indonesia (Natuna/Sabang), Philippines	Strategic chokepoints (Malacca, South China Sea), multilateral diplomacy

				(Subic/Ulugan), rotational US access	
China (PLAN)	~340 (destroyers, frigates, corvettes)	58 (nuclear & diesel)	~600	Djibouti, Hambantota, Gwadar, Ream, Kyaukpyu, Laem Chabang, Dar es Salaam	Growing blue-water navy, strong regional proximity, dual-use BRI infrastructure

Sources: SIPRI (2023), IISS Military Balance (2023), CRS Reports, official defence white papers.

STRATEGIC POSTURE OF AUSTRALIA, JAPAN AND ASEAN COUNTRIES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Strategic Orientation and Policy Evolution

Australia’s strategic orientation has evolved from a largely continental defence mindset towards an outward-looking, deterrence-based posture centred firmly on the Indo-Pacific. Successive strategic documents, including the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, identify the region as Australia’s principal sphere of interest, highlighting the need to shape its immediate strategic environment and deter coercion. Increasingly aligned with the United States and like-minded partners, Australia presents itself as an advocate of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” deepening involvement in minilateral formats such as the QUAD and AUKUS while maintaining active support for ASEAN centrality.

Japan’s strategic posture has undergone a profound transformation over the last decade under the doctrine of “Proactive Contribution to Peace.” The Indo-Pacific lies at the heart of Tokyo’s strategic thinking, with the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy positioning Japan as a key guardian of the international rules-based order. Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision frames its engagement as both normative and security-driven, reflecting

intensifying concerns over China's rise and regional coercion. Japan is expanding defence budgets, acquiring counter-strike capabilities, and forging deeper strategic linkages with Australia, India, ASEAN, and other partners to secure a multipolar Indo-Pacific order.

ASEAN, by contrast, adopts a posture of strategic “centrality” that seeks to preserve its role at the core of Indo-Pacific regional architecture. The 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) articulates a preference for dialogue and inclusive cooperation over alignment with any major-power bloc. While recognising intensifying geopolitical competition, ASEAN collectively emphasises multilateralism, maritime connectivity, and economic integration as stabilising forces. Despite differing national threat perceptions, ASEAN aims to maintain autonomy by promoting an Indo-Pacific that is open, inclusive, and not dominated by rivalry between China and the United States.

Security and Defence Instruments

Australia's security toolkit in the Indo-Pacific increasingly combines its own developing hard-power capabilities with alliance-based force projection. The trilateral AUKUS framework with the United States and United Kingdom will provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and advanced undersea and cyber capabilities, allowing a more robust deterrent profile. Australia hosts rotational deployments of US Marines in Darwin, cooperates extensively with US forces at facilities such as Pine Gap and HMAS Stirling, and employs defence diplomacy through its “Pacific Step-Up” programme, aimed at building resilience among Pacific Island states amid intensifying strategic interest from China.

Japan's security instruments rest on highly capable Self-Defence Forces with growing expeditionary and strike reach. A suite of new capabilities, including Tomahawk cruise missiles, F-35B fighters, and converted helicopter carriers, underscores Tokyo's transition from a purely defensive force towards a more proactive security actor. Japan utilises strategic partnerships and reciprocal access agreements with

Australia, India, the Philippines and European states to widen its operational footprint. Maritime capacity-building funding, humanitarian assistance, and coast guard training allow Japan to shape its neighbourhood while promoting the norms of the FOIP vision.

ASEAN collectively relies more on institution-building and multilateral frameworks than hard-power instruments. Platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and East Asia Summit enable ASEAN to convene regional security dialogue and promote confidence-building measures. While capacity remains disparate across member states, ASEAN conducts coordinated patrols in critical maritime zones such as the Malacca Strait and increasingly hosts joint exercises with external partners. Its strategic approach emphasises diplomacy, norms, and incremental functional cooperation over military deterrence.

Contributions and Deployments

Australia contributes rotational US Marine deployments, long-range patrols, and capacity-building initiatives across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, positioning itself as a frontline security provider among US allies. Japan regularly deploys naval and air assets throughout the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, participates in multi-national exercises, and provides security assistance to Indo-Pacific partners as part of its broader FOIP strategy. ASEAN member states contribute through coordinated maritime patrols and combined exercises, especially in areas such as the Malacca and Sulu Seas, while increasingly engaging with QUAD partners to enhance maritime domain awareness and coast guard capabilities.

Strengths and Constraints

Australia's primary strengths lie in its alliance with the United States, strategic geography astride vital maritime chokepoints, and its rapid defence modernisation under AUKUS. However, its limited population and industrial base render it dependent on external partners for sustainment and high-end capabilities. Japan benefits from one of

the world’s most technologically advanced naval and air forces, close coordination with the United States, and growing normative leadership in shaping Indo-Pacific security discourse. Yet constitutional constraints, demographic ageing, and fiscal pressures complicate rapid expansion of defence commitments. ASEAN’s major strength lies in its convening power and diplomatic agility, enabling it to maintain strategic relevance despite limited hard-power capacity. Internal divergence in threat perception, coupled with resource constraints, hampers ASEAN’s ability to present a unified strategic or military response to accelerating great-power competition.

**ROLE OF SMALL ISLAND IN INDO PACIFIC
GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION**

China employs a multi-faceted "island strategy" in the Indo-Pacific, closely linked to its Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the Maritime Silk Road . This involves extensive economic engagement, often through substantial infrastructure projects, which critics label as "debt diplomacy," potentially creating financial dependencies for small island nations.¹⁰ China also actively asserts territorial claims and engages in military expansion, including the construction of artificial islands in strategic areas like the South China Sea, thereby enhancing its naval and air projection capabilities.

In response, key arc of democratic powers—the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—are forming coalitions with small island states, emphasizing a collaborative approach and the need to "lean in" to counter China's influence¹¹ .

Table-5.2 Strategy and Coalition by QUAD with small Islands in Indo- Pacific

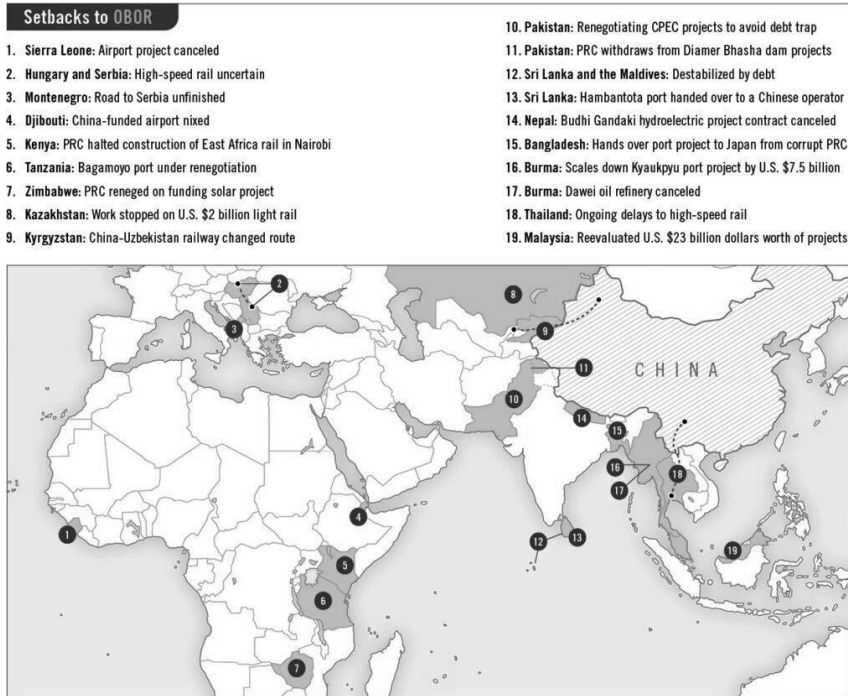
COUNTRY	STRATEGY AND COALITION BY QUAD
India	Developing its port in Galathea bay in Andaman and Nicobar Islands as strategic assets . It engages with island nations through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, offering economic cooperation and development assistance. India's

	Logistics Support Agreements (LSAs) with France and Australia allow for reciprocal use of facilities in the Indian Ocean. ¹⁰ India's strategic weight, development narrative, and strong diaspora in the Pacific islands of Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon island are valuable assets for fostering positive engagement within the democratic effort.
Japan	Promotes a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision and engages Pacific microstates through initiatives like the Pacific Island Leaders Meeting, offering development aid and infrastructure support. Japan has also signed Logistics Support Agreements with countries like India, facilitating mutual access to island facilities (Scott, 2021). Japan provides substantial development support to the region to especially to pacific Microstates as a Quad member.
Australia	Actively engages in the Pacific through development aid, security cooperation, and diplomatic outreach. It works closely with partners like India and the US on initiatives like the Quad to enhance regional security and provide alternatives to Chinese financing and influence. Australia also participates in competitive naval "soft power" initiatives . It's recognized that democratic powers, including Australia, must actively support these nations and ensure Pacific countries feel consulted and respected.
USA	Utilizes its sovereign territories like Guam and Hawaii as strategic bases. It renews Compacts of Free Association with Micronesian states, providing economic and security assistance in exchange for strategic access. The U.S. also

	conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations to challenge excessive maritime claims and militarization. As part of the Quad, the US is increasing its commitment through the US-Pacific partnership strategy, expanding diplomatic presence and boosting development expenditure.
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These collective efforts, including the Quad alliance which is fundamental to maintaining a "free and open Indo-Pacific", aim to provide small island nations with viable alternatives and strengthen their resilience, ensuring a balanced and inclusive regional order. The emphasis on consultation and respect is crucial to avoid dissatisfaction, as seen with the AUKUS partnership's rollout, where a lack of prior consultation caused concern among Pacific countries. With concerted strategical endeavour of QUAD country and other Multilateral alliance along with Chinese own inherent debt trap policy and Furthermore, the so-called China model restricts freedoms through its surveillance technologies, encourages authoritarianism and corruption, and threatens weak democracies. For corrupt elites in weak economies with broken political systems, readily accessible Chinese loans are the new opium. Pressure for political reform is frequently generated domestically by worries about China's stifling influence over regional economies. Beijing's growing economic influence frequently erodes democratic institutions, promotes strongman politics, alters the relationship between the military and the civilian population, and fuels corruption. Furthermore, during periods of regime change or general elections, as was recently the case in Burma, Indonesia, the Maldives, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka, the China factor becomes a contentious issue. Due to these factors there is a setback to OBOR which has been clearly depicted in figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4 Setback to OBOR



Source: Indo-Pacific defence forum;

<https://ipdefenceforum.com/2020/03/countering-chinas-maritime-ambitions/>

For India, the Indo-Pacific constitutes the "main artery" for its growth and development, with nearly 90% of its trade and energy supplies transiting through the Indian Ocean. Securing Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), ensuring freedom of navigation, and promoting peaceful conflict resolution are paramount concerns for New Delhi, alongside addressing China's growing presence in its immediate like Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bhutan. India's strategic response to these dynamics is encapsulated in its "Act East Policy." This chapter will explore India's Act East Policy, its multi-aligned engagement, the impact of ASEAN centrality, and the informing role of the Mandala theory in navigating the complex geopolitical contestation and securing India's economic interest in the Indo-Pacific amid Chinese assertion.

Chapter- 6

INDIA'S strategic interest and Indo-Pacific vision

INDIA'S STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES: INTERESTS, THREATS, AND AMBITIONS

India's strategic imperatives in the Indo-Pacific are multifaceted, encompassing vital economic, security, and normative dimensions. A primary interest for New Delhi is ensuring resilient supply chains, particularly for critical resources such as energy, food, and semiconductors.¹⁰ India also advocates for burden-sharing and interoperability to guarantee access to global commons, alongside a steadfast commitment to upholding international law (Saran, 2024). Economically, the Indo-Pacific is indispensable, serving as a crucial nexus for global trade and energy security. With India's trade-to-GDP ratio standing at 31% in 2023, there remains substantial potential for deeper economic integration within the region (EAC-PM, 2023).

The threat perception for India in the Indo-Pacific is complex and evolving. The most significant challenge emanates from China's escalating military and economic assertiveness. This includes China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its strategic economic investments in India's neighbouring countries. This dynamic has fostered a perception within India of facing a "two-front war," encompassing both its continental borders with China and Pakistan, and its maritime domain (NMF Report, 2024). China's Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI), coupled with its acquisition of strategic ports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, directly challenges India's traditional influence and its aspiration to be the predominant power in the region. Beyond state-centric rivalries, India also confronts a range of non-traditional security threats, including the pervasive impacts of climate change, piracy, human trafficking, and maritime terrorism. The shift in India's threat perception from primarily continental to increasingly maritime directly influences its strategic recalibration and emphasis on naval capabilities (Dutta, 2024). This, in turn, shapes its partnerships, leading to a greater focus on maritime security cooperation within forums like the Quad (Lok Sabha, 2024).

India's rising global stature positions it as a pivotal player in the Indo-Pacific, underpinning its strategic ambitions. New Delhi aims to enhance regional stability and security through initiatives like the "Act East Policy," which seeks to deepen economic and security ties with Southeast Asian nations. A key ambition involves protecting vital maritime routes by emphasizing freedom of navigation and expanding its naval capabilities. India also aspires to be a credible voice in addressing practical regional challenges, mainstreaming its Indo-Pacific vision, and scaling up local solutions for global application (Paradesi, 2024). This includes a concerted focus on building domestic economic capacities, deepening its technological edge, and enhancing defence capabilities. Notably, India has adapted its role from aiming to be a "net security provider" to a "preferred security partner" for Asia-Pacific nations, a pragmatic adjustment given its budget and capacity constraints (EAC-PM, 2023). This evolving strategic outlook reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the changing geopolitical landscape, where the maritime domain has emerged as a primary theatre for geopolitical competition (IDSA, 2024). This necessitates a continuous re-evaluation of its traditional strategic culture and resource allocation to effectively address new security challenges and realize its ambitions for regional and global influence.

RECONCILING ASPIRATIONS WITH STRATEGIC REALITIES

The central research problem confronting India in the Indo-Pacific lies in its persistent challenge to reconcile ambitious grand strategic aspirations with complex strategic realities. India envisions itself as a leading global power, committed to maintaining strategic autonomy and shaping a multipolar Indo-Pacific order (Jaishankar, 2024). However, this vision is often constrained by internal limitations such as resource scarcity, bureaucratic inertia, and the formidable influence of China, which presents a significant external challenge. This dilemma is sometimes framed as "America's India Conundrum," underscoring the degree to which the durability of the Indo-Pacific dynamic depends on New Delhi's willingness to collaborate with the United States and its allies in the region (Bajpai, 2024).

India's foreign policy is characterized by a continuous effort to navigate between the desire for strategic independence and the necessity of external partnerships to address complex geopolitical challenges, particularly the rise of China. Historically, India adhered to non-alignment; however, this has evolved into a policy of "multi-alignment" or "omni-alignment" (Saran, 2023). This approach seeks to engage multiple poles of power while steadfastly preserving its strategic autonomy. Yet, this strategy faces considerable challenges in an increasingly polarizing international environment. External pressures, such as the imposition of US tariffs linked to India's ties with Russia, can significantly constrain its diplomatic flexibility and economic manoeuvrability (Brewster, 2024). The core challenge remains how to translate shared strategic perspectives with partners into collective arrangements for deterrence and defence without compromising India's long-standing independent stance.

Despite its growing capabilities and an elevated international profile, India frequently encounters a gap between its aspirations and its capacity to fully respond to the evolving security environment. This capability gap is evident in the slow pace of certain infrastructure projects and the persistent need for external partnerships to bridge

existing deficits (Sudan, 2022). The gap between India's aspirations for global leadership and its internal capacity constraints directly leads to a "strategic deficit" and necessitates a pragmatic, often reactive, foreign policy approach (Joshi, 2023). This can result in a perceived "strategic ambiguity" (Medcalf, 2024) and limits its ability to fully operationalize its Indo-Pacific vision. The core research problem thus highlights that India's geopolitical equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is not merely a function of external power dynamics but is profoundly shaped by its internal strengths and weaknesses, and its ability to adapt its strategic culture to contemporary realities.

MANDALA THEORY: ANCIENT WISDOM IN MODERN GEOPOLITICS

India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is not merely a set of reactive responses to external pressures but is deeply informed by a rich tapestry of theoretical perspectives, blending classical International Relations (IR) paradigms with indigenous strategic thought. This section explores the theoretical underpinnings of India's approach, examining the interplay between realism and institutionalism, the discursive construction of geopolitical spaces through critical geopolitics, and the enduring relevance of Kautilyan statecraft. The aim is to synthesize these diverse frameworks into a multi-paradigm approach that comprehensively explains India's strategic behavior in the region.

REALISM & INSTITUTIONAL THEORY: POWER BALANCING VS. COOPERATIVE SECURITY

India's foreign policy exhibits a pragmatic blend of realist power balancing and institutionalist cooperative security, reflecting a nuanced adaptation to a complex multipolar world. The realist underpinnings in Indian foreign policy became increasingly apparent from the mid-1950s, driven by security pressures and border skirmishes, which necessitated a heightened focus on national security and military capabilities. This realist orientation is evident in India's pursuit of a multi-alignment strategy and its recognition of the power

asymmetry with China (Kautilya, 2023). Indeed, Balance of Power (BoP) theory, a core tenet of realism, significantly influences the theoretical explanations of India's foreign policy towards Southeast and East Asia. For instance, India's active engagement with the Quad countries is primarily motivated by the desire to protect its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region and to counterbalance China's growing influence. This response to perceived security threats, particularly from China, directly drives India's inclination towards military modernization and strategic partnerships (Krishnappa, 2024).

Despite these strong realist tendencies, India simultaneously embraces institutional theory, advocating for a rules-based international order and multilateral cooperation. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), proposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a prime example of this institutionalist approach. It is an open, non-treaty-based initiative designed to foster cooperative solutions to common challenges in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing a multipolar region that is not hostile to any single country (Ningthoujam, 2025). India's approach to the Indo-Pacific aligns strategically with the liberal-order framework, promoting inclusivity and a consultative growth environment. This dual approach is strategically designed to maintain a balance with the power structures led by both the United States and China (Sood, 2024). India's active participation in diverse multilateral forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the Quad underscores its commitment to advancing global governance issues and ensuring access to global commons.

The tension between power balancing (realism) and cooperative security (institutionalism) is a defining characteristic of India's strategy. While India seeks to balance China's assertiveness through mini lateral groupings like the Quad, it simultaneously emphasizes non-traditional security issues and the provision of public goods to avoid being perceived as part of an anti-China containment strategy (Nayak, 2025). This strategic choice allows India to shape the region in a manner favourable to its interests while retaining decisional autonomy and the flexibility to partner with multiple actors (Dutta,

2024). India's commitment to strategic autonomy and its desire to avoid being perceived as aligning too closely with any single power push it towards institutionalist engagements that prioritize inclusivity and a rules-based order. This suggests that India does not rigidly adhere to one theory but rather employs a "theoretical fusion" to maximize its national interests. The "consultative nature of growth environment" and "spirit of inclusivity" promoted by India can be interpreted as a strategic application of institutionalist rhetoric to achieve underlying realist objectives, enabling it to balance against major powers while simultaneously fostering a more favourable regional order.

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

Critical geopolitics provides a crucial lens through which to understand the "Indo-Pacific" as more than a mere geographical descriptor; it is a discursively constructed term that reflects underlying political visions and power struggles (Basrur, 2024). The sudden prominence of this term in international political discourse suggests its utility not only in reflecting contemporary realities, such as the shifting dynamism of the global economy towards East Asia, but also as a deliberate policy tool.

India's narrative of the Indo-Pacific is particularly illustrative of this discursive construction. New Delhi emphasizes millennia-old historical and cultural connections between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, a relationship built on a shared heritage of peace, friendship, religion, and commerce. This historical anchoring serves a strategic purpose: it distinguishes India's approach from that of other countries, for whom the term "Indo-Pacific" might carry more overt strategic or containment-oriented motivations. Indian foreign policy in the 1990s, notably the "Look East Policy" and the concept of an "extended neighborhood," already foreshadowed this broader geographical conceptualization, making the contemporary Indo-

Pacific naturally compatible with New Delhi's regional strategic vision.

India's deliberate emphasis on civilizational links and the "enduring breakdown of the geographical distinction between the two oceans" serves to legitimize its adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept and assert its co-production of this geopolitical space². This narrative strategy aims to present India's commitment to the Indo-Pacific as inherent and organic, rather than solely a strategic response to external dynamics. This implies a significant investment in ideational power to influence regional norms and perceptions, which can have tangible geopolitical outcomes.

The contemporary Indo-Pacific concept is, however, also shaped by contesting narratives. China's growing economic and military capabilities, coupled with the strategic importance of the maritime domain, have led to a political and strategic reconceptualization of the region that is distinct from previous trade-centric views. This highlights how different actors actively construct the region's geography and purpose to serve their respective national interests. Critical geopolitics thus reveals that India's foreign policy is not solely about material capabilities or institutional engagements but also about shaping the very understanding of the region through narrative, thereby influencing its future trajectory.

KAUTILYAN STATECRAFT & MANDALA THEORY: RELEVANCE IN MODERN STRATEGY

Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, offers the Rajamandala theory as a foundational indigenous realist framework for understanding interstate relations. This theory, with its emphasis on geographical proximity determining alliances and rivalries, continues to inform India's strategic calculus in its immediate neighborhood and its approach to power projection. At its core, the Mandala theory posits a central state, the *Vijigishu* (aspirant conqueror), surrounded by concentric circles of states. Immediate neighbors (*Ari*) are considered natural enemies, while the neighbors of

those enemies (*Mitra*) are potential allies. This model assumes that states act primarily out of self-interest, with their survival and expansion contingent upon astute strategic maneuvering.

To achieve strategic objectives, Kautilya advocated a six-fold policy (*Shadgunya*) comprising peace (*Sandhi*), war (*Vigraha*), neutrality (*Asana*), preparation for war (*Yana*), alliance (*Samsraya*), and dual policy (*Dvaidhibhava*). Complementing these were five tactics (*Upayas*): conciliation (*Sama*), gifts (*Dana*), dissension (*Bheda*), deceit (*Maya*), and open attack (*Danda*) (Mishra, 2023). These principles underscore a pragmatic, self-interested approach, where the fluidity of alliances is paramount; friendship or alliances can be dissolved if they prove disadvantageous. Kautilya's emphasis on "gaining and maintaining power without moral confusion" highlights a stark realpolitik orientation.

The enduring relevance of Kautilyan principles to India's national security strategy, particularly concerning China, is notable. China, with its shared land border and growing assertiveness, often fits the role of the "Ari" (enemy or rival) in India's strategic calculations, especially given ongoing border tensions, competition in the Indian Ocean, and economic rivalry. In response, India's growing relations with countries like Vietnam, Japan, and Australia reflect the "Mitra" logic of aligning with an enemy's enemy. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) grouping, for instance, serves this purpose in counterbalancing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific⁴⁵. India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and its nuanced balancing act between hard and soft tactics can be seen as contemporary applications of the Mandala approach. The core tenet of "neighbour as natural enemy" (Saha, 2024) directly influences India's strategic caution and its tendency to seek alliances with "neighbour's neighbours" to counterbalance immediate threats like Pakistan and China. This historical logic provides a "strategic grammar".

Furthermore, unlike the radical realism often associated with Machiavelli, Kautilya's framework incorporates an "ethical

obligation" for the state to ensure the welfare of its people, suggesting an "Eclectic theory" that bridges idealism and realism in international relations (Khanna, 2023). The enduring relevance of Kautilyan statecraft underscores that India's foreign policy is deeply rooted in its civilizational heritage, providing a non-Western theoretical lens that offers unique insights into its pragmatic and flexible approach to alliances and rivalries.

CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS: A MULTI-PARADIGM APPROACH TO INDIAN STRATEGY

India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific cannot be adequately understood through a singular theoretical lens; rather, it necessitates an integrative approach that draws from classical realism, institutionalism, and indigenous strategic thought. This "theoretical fusion" allows India to navigate the complexities of a multipolar world and steadfastly pursue its strategic autonomy. The inherent fluidity and uncertainty of the global order compel India to adopt such a multi-paradigm approach, enabling it to adapt to new realities and forge new alliances.

The shift from Nehruvian Non-Alignment to an assertive, pragmatic framework is often characterized as "All-Alignment". This approach strategically positions India as a "global pivot state," capable of balancing great power interests while simultaneously amplifying the voice of the Global South. This enables India to diversify its engagement with numerous middle powers, thereby building broad support for its geopolitical positions and effectively countering China's growing influence (Khurana, 2023). This "eclectic theory" allows India to pursue both power balancing and cooperative security simultaneously, maximizing its manoeuvrability and influence in an increasingly fragmented world (Rolland, 2023).

At the core of this conceptual synthesis lies the principle of strategic autonomy. This remains the cornerstone of India's foreign policy, empowering New Delhi to make independent decisions free from external influence, solely in pursuit of its national interests. This

autonomy is achieved by engaging as many countries as possible, specifically with the objective of fostering regional and global multipolarity.

The integration of indigenous thought, particularly Kautilyan statecraft, further enriches this multi-paradigm approach. Kanti Bajpai's "Indian Grand Strategy: Six Schools of Thought" highlights the diverse narratives that inform India's strategic discourse, encompassing realist, institutionalist, and idealist paradigms, alongside distinct culturalist positions. Shyam Saran's "How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century" further illuminates the historical sources of India's worldview, utilizing Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as a prism for understanding contemporary foreign policy. This deep integration of indigenous thought provides a unique "strategic culture" that shapes India's responses to global challenges. The multi-paradigm approach, encompassing "All-Alignment" and drawing from Kautilyan statecraft, represents a conscious effort to indigenize International Relations theory. This not only enriches theoretical pluralism but also positions India as a unique geopolitical actor capable of navigating complex global dynamics with a distinct strategic grammar.

FIGURE: 6.1 Conceptual synthesis of IR theories in Indian strategy (multi-paradigm approach)

Diagram 1: Conceptual Synthesis of IR Theories in Indian Strategy (Multi-Paradigm Approach)



Source: Curated by Author

Above diagram visually represents how India integrates elements of classical International Relations theories (Realism, Institutionalism) with Critical Geopolitics and indigenous Kautilyan Statecraft into a cohesive, adaptive multi-paradigm approach. It illustrates the interplay and overlaps, demonstrating how these theories are not mutually exclusive but are strategically combined to inform India's foreign policy. The visual aid helps to quickly grasp the complexity and sophistication of India's strategic thinking.

The diagram depicts four interconnected spheres representing Realism, Institutionalism, Critical Geopolitics, and Kautilyan

Statecraft. At the center, a fifth, overarching sphere represents "Strategic Autonomy" or "All-Alignment," serving as the core objective that these theoretical tools collectively serve. Arrows indicate mutual influence and interaction between the spheres.

1. **REALISM:** Emphasizes power balancing, national interest, and military strength.
2. **INSTITUTIONALISM:** Focuses on rules-based order, multilateralism, and cooperative security.
3. **CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS:** Highlights discursive construction of space and narrative shaping.
4. **KAUTILYAN STATECRAFT:** Incorporates Mandala logic, Shadgunya (six-fold policy), and ethical pragmatism.
5. **CENTRAL SPHERE (STRATEGIC AUTONOMY/ALL-ALIGNMENT):** The ultimate goal, achieved through the dynamic interplay and selective application of the other four theoretical approaches.

EVOLUTION OF AEP: FROM LOOK EAST TO INDO-PACIFIC PIVOT

The origins of India's eastward engagement can be traced back to the "Look East Policy" (LEP), initiated in 1991 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao ⁷¹. This policy marked a pivotal strategic shift in India's global outlook, moving away from its Cold War-era non-alignment stance. The LEP's primary objective was to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations, focusing on forging close economic and commercial ties, increasing strategic cooperation, and emphasizing historical cultural links.⁷² India sought to create and expand regional markets for trade, investments, and industrial development, recognizing the economic dynamism of the region.

"The Modi administration, in 2014, rebranded the LEP as the "Act East Policy" (AEP), signalling a more proactive, action-oriented, and

outcome-based approach. This transition was not merely a change in nomenclature but represented a significant expansion of the policy's scope. While LEP primarily focused on economic objectives, AEP broadened its ambit to encompass security, defence, and connectivity, and widened its geographical focus from Southeast and Northeast Asia to the entire Indo-Pacific region. This strategic recalibration was a direct response to several critical geopolitical developments: China's accelerating rise and increasing assertiveness across the region, the perceived inadequacies of the post-Cold War security order in Asia, and India's own growing capabilities, profile, and international obligations. The securitization of India's eastward engagement, reflecting a wider scope and greater urgency, was explicitly meant to preserve a favourable balance of power by ensuring a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific”.

The AEP is built upon key pillars, often summarized as the "4 Cs": Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, and Capacity Building (Panda, 2023) “Its overarching objectives include strengthening political ties, boosting economic integration, and enhancing security collaboration with East Asia at large”. The policy explicitly seeks to preserve a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific by securing the Indian Ocean, integrating with Southeast Asia, deepening strategic partnerships with balancing powers (such as the United States, Japan, and Australia), and carefully managing differences with China. Vital infrastructure projects, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, are integral components designed to improve physical connectivity and facilitate trade (Khurana, 2024).

The AEP's transformation into an Indo-Pacific pivot reflects India's recognition that its economic prosperity and security are inextricably linked to the stability and openness of the broader Indo-Pacific maritime domain, necessitating a more robust and integrated foreign policy. This convergence is evident in the alignment of AEP with broader Indo-Pacific frameworks like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), fostering regional cooperation on sustainable

development and maritime security. Furthermore, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has effectively become an important constituent of India's Act East policy, expanding its reach to include the US and Australia. This expansion is driven by both economic considerations and a strong security dimension, primarily in response to China's assertive rise and expanding influence in the region (Pant, 2024).

EMPIRICAL MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES

Assessing the efficacy of the Act East Policy as India's geoeconomic gateway necessitates an empirical examination of its outcomes across geopolitical, economic, and infrastructural dimensions. While the policy articulates ambitious goals, the tangible achievements and persistent challenges provide a clearer picture of its operationalization.

GEOPOLITICAL GAINS: INFLUENCE IN ASEAN FORUMS, QUAD SECURITY COORDINATION

India's engagement with ASEAN has progressed significantly, evolving from a formal dialogue partnership in 1992 to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2022. India consistently reaffirms ASEAN's centrality in its regional approach and actively supports the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). India's participation in key ASEAN-led forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), demonstrates its commitment to regional dialogue and security cooperation. Beyond formal engagements, India employs cultural diplomacy, exemplified by initiatives like the Buddhist Relics Outreach Programme, to foster deeper people-to-people connections and subtly counter Chinese cultural influence in Southeast Asia. India leverages minilateral and multilateral forums to advance its geopolitical interests, often prioritizing non-traditional security cooperation to avoid direct confrontation with China while building strategic partnerships.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), initially formed for humanitarian relief, has strategically shifted its focus to countering China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific since 2017. India, as a key player, participates in the Quad, which primarily addresses non-traditional security issues such as supply chain resilience, health security, disaster resilience, and maritime domain awareness (IPMDA). India's involvement in Quad activities, including the MAITRI initiative for maritime security training, aims to enhance regional capacity and deter unlawful behavior. While some observers perceive India as a "weak link" due to its reluctance to embrace traditional security issues as a unified grouping, its bilateral security ties with Australia, Japan, and the United States are deepening. This is evidenced by joint military exercises like Malabar and collaborations in critical technologies. India's discomfort with framing the Quad as an explicitly anti-China grouping⁴¹ leads it to consistently advocate for a focus on non-traditional security issues and the provision of public goods. This strategic choice allows India to maintain decisional autonomy and engage ASEAN countries without alienating them or sparking fears of major power competition. The nuanced approach to security cooperation within the Quad and ASEAN-led forums highlights a sophisticated balancing act. The geopolitical gains are not solely measured in military terms but also in India's ability to shape regional norms, build capacity among partners, and project itself as a responsible security provider, thereby gaining diplomatic leverage.

INFRASTRUCTURE DIPLOMACY: DELAYS IN KALADAN & SITTWE VS. SUCCESSES IN CHABAHAR

India's infrastructure diplomacy, a key component of its Act East Policy, has yielded mixed results, with significant delays in some projects contrasting with notable successes in others. **THE KALADAN MULTI-MODAL TRANSIT TRANSPORT PROJECT (KMMTTP)** and the Sittwe Port in Myanmar exemplify the challenges. The KMMTTP, conceived as a friendship project between India and Myanmar, aims to provide an alternative trade route to India's landlocked northeastern states, bypassing the narrow Siliguri

Corridor. Sittwe Port, developed by India at the mouth of the Kaladan River, is a critical linchpin for this project and became operational in May 2023. Despite initial projections for completion by 2014, the project has faced substantial delays, with a new operational target now set for 2027. These delays are primarily attributed to persistent political unrest and insurgency threats by Chin Conflict, Rohingyas conflict and militant groups such as Arakan Army and Arakan Rohingyas Salvation Army (ARSA) in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State where the port is located, as well as infrastructural challenges, including unmetalled road sections. The political instability and insurgency in Myanmar directly caused significant delays in the Kaladan and Sittwe projects despite India's financial commitments.

Figure 6.2: Route map of The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project



Source: Indian Express daily newspaper

In contrast, **THE CHABAHAH PORT** in Iran stands as a notable success in India's infrastructure diplomacy. “India and Iran initially agreed to develop the port in 2003, with India taking over operations of a portion of the port in December 2018. This strategically vital port offers an alternative trade route between India and Afghanistan, crucially bypassing Pakistan, and provides a gateway to Central Asia

and Eurasia. India's investment includes refurbishing berths and constructing modern container handling facilities, solidified by a 10-year agreement signed in May 2024 to ensure continuous operations". Chabahar has demonstrated its operational effectiveness by handling over 8.4 million metric tonnes of bulk and general cargo and facilitating the transshipment of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its strategic value is further enhanced by its inclusion in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which strengthens India's connectivity to Russian and Eurasian markets. Chabahar's success is partly attributable to its strategic importance in bypassing Pakistan and its integration into broader connectivity initiatives like INSTC, which provided sustained geopolitical impetus. As per strategic visualisation by Prof. Jagannath Panda, Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) The INSTC has assumed greater significance as a trans-regional integration vehicle. At the same time, amid the era-defining autocracies versus democracies polarization, China's growing bonhomie with both Iran and Russia along with India's closer ties with the US has raised questions about the sustainability and viability of the INSTC.

"The INSTC is strategically crucial for India because the corridor route circumvents Pakistan and provides Delhi access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, providing a viable counter to the controversial China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) of the BRI that India alleges violates its sovereignty. India is thus looking to expand the strategic value of the INSTC. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tehran in 2016, India pledged up to USD 500 million investment, including USD 150 million line of credit from Exim Bank to the Iran's Maritime and Ports Organization for making jetties and berths, to develop Iran's Chabahar port as a regional trade hub. This would allow for an alternative land-sea route for trade with Central Asia and thus is an integral part of the INSTC."

The mixed outcomes in India's infrastructure diplomacy highlight that while such projects are vital tools for geoeconomic influence, their

success is not purely economic but deeply intertwined with complex geopolitical and internal political dynamics. The effectiveness of India's infrastructure diplomacy as a geoeconomic gateway is highly contingent on the political stability of partner countries and the absence of significant security challenges.

CONSTRAINTS: RESOURCE LIMITATIONS, BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA, CHINESE COUNTER- STRATEGIES

The full realization of India's Act East Policy objectives is significantly impeded by a confluence of internal systemic weaknesses and external strategic competition. These constraints manifest across various dimensions, from resource allocation and bureaucratic efficiency to the formidable counter-strategies employed by China.

India's foreign policy is inherently constrained by its economic and technological limitations. With a GDP of approximately \$4.3 trillion, which is considerably smaller than China's \$19.23 trillion, India faces inherent challenges in projecting power and exerting diplomatic influence on a scale commensurate with its aspirations. Infrastructure projects, which are capital-intensive and central to the AEP's connectivity goals, are particularly vulnerable to financial limitations and an over-reliance on external financial support. This economic and technological weakness limits its ability to export power and exert diplomatic influence.

Bureaucratic inertia and a lack of clear policy articulation also pose significant hurdles. The Act East Policy, despite its elevated urgency and strategic importance, is not formally codified in a single official government document, which can lead to some confusion regarding its precise contours and implementation. More critically, bureaucratic bottlenecks in implementing agreements and the complexities of obtaining permits and clearances across different countries hinder the progress of crucial connectivity projects, as exemplified by the challenges faced by the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement. Furthermore, the poor infrastructural quality of

Land Custom Stations in India's Northeastern region acts as a major impediment to seamless cross-border trade and connectivity. Bureaucratic inertia and policy inconsistency, directly lead to prolonged negotiations and stalled projects, thereby hindering physical connectivity under AEP.

Perhaps the most formidable external constraint comes from China's assertive counter-strategies. Beijing views the Indo-Pacific strategy, and by extension India's Act East Policy, primarily as a US-led containment effort. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as a direct counter-strategy, leveraging debt traps and the acquisition of strategic assets—such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka—to expand its influence in India's neighbourhood and the surrounding maritime domain. China's vast economic and military might position it as a formidable competitor, making it challenging for India to match Beijing's financial and infrastructural outreach in the region. This creates a "connectivity gap" that China actively exploits through its more proactive BRI initiatives, thereby undermining India's regional influence. The constraints on AEP reveal that India's strategic vision, however robust, is vulnerable to its own implementation capacities and the aggressive counter-strategies of a rising competitor. This suggests that overcoming internal limitations is as crucial as managing external challenges for India to effectively assert itself in the Indo-Pacific.

INTERIM VERDICT : PARTIAL SUCCESS, SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The Act East Policy has achieved partial success in deepening India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. Diplomatic and security cooperation with partners like ASEAN and Quad members has seen notable advancements, particularly in areas of non-traditional security and maritime domain awareness. However, the policy's full potential as a "geoeconomic gateway" remains significantly constrained by systemic challenges. These include persistent trade deficits with key partners, substantial delays in critical infrastructure projects due to political instability in partner countries

and internal bureaucratic hurdles, and formidable counter-strategies from China. While India has expanded its strategic partnerships and enhanced its regional presence, the empirical outcomes, especially in terms of comprehensive economic integration and seamless connectivity, indicate that significant gaps persist between its strategic aspirations and the realities of implementation. The policy has created a framework for engagement but struggles to translate this into consistently tangible and transformative results across all its intended dimensions.

MULTI-ALIGNMENT IN PLURALISTIC FRAMEWORKS – DIVERSIFICATION OR DIFFUSION?

India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is characterized by a distinctive strategy of "multi-alignment," a pragmatic evolution from its historical non-alignment. India is engaging with numerous pluralistic frameworks, effectively diversifies India's strategic partnerships and enhances its leverage, or if it risks diffusing its efforts and leading to strategic incoherence. India's key institutional engagements, assesses their operationalization and effectiveness, and analyses the capacity challenges and strategic trade-offs inherent in this complex diplomatic posture. India's extensive institutional engagements across various plurilateral and multilateral forums reflect a conscious strategy of "multi-alignment" to diversify partnerships and maximize strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

MAPPING INDIA'S INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENTS : QUAD, IORA, BIMSTEC, FIPIC, AUSINDEX

India's multi-alignment strategy is operationalized through its active participation in a diverse array of institutional frameworks across the Indo-Pacific. These engagements serve to diversify its partnerships, build strategic leverage, and address a wide spectrum of security, economic, and developmental concerns. The increasing complexity of the Indo-Pacific security environment, particularly the rise of China, compels India to engage in a wide array of institutional frameworks. This diversification is driven by a desire to build broad support for its

geopolitical positions and counter Chinese influence, while avoiding exclusive alliances.

The **QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE (QUAD)**, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, is a prominent diplomatic partnership. Initially focused on humanitarian relief, its emphasis shifted significantly after 2017 to countering China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. India's participation is crucial for counterbalancing China's dominance and promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Quad's agenda extends beyond traditional military cooperation to include non-traditional security issues such as resilient supply chains, health security, disaster resilience, and maritime domain awareness (IPMDA).

The **INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA)** is a 23-member intergovernmental organization established in 1997, connecting countries across Asia, Africa, and Australia. IORA aims to promote maritime safety, trade cooperation, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable development. India plays a leading role, seeking to boost IORA's budget, integrate technology for data and policy management, and foster maritime-focused education and research programs. India aligns IORA's goals with its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, aiming for an inclusive, secure maritime order. IORA is viewed as a critical forum for multilateral maritime governance that avoids overt military alliances, particularly as India seeks to prevent it from becoming overly Beijing-centric.

The **BAY OF BENGAL INITIATIVE FOR MULTI-SECTORAL TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION (BIMSTEC)** includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. This grouping strives to foster economic development, technological cooperation, and cultural exchange among its members⁹¹. BIMSTEC serves as a unique link between South Asia and Southeast Asia and is considered a key component of India's "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" policies⁹². India leads the efforts on non-traditional security threats within BIMSTEC.

The **FORUM FOR INDIA-PACIFIC ISLANDS COOPERATION (FIPIC)**, established in 2014, is a strategic initiative through which India strengthens its diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement with 14 Pacific Island Countries (PICs). FIPIC's objectives include counterbalancing growing Chinese influence, deepening development partnerships in areas like energy, sustainable growth, and climate resilience, and promoting cultural ties. FIPIC is presented as a uniquely Indian, non-militarized alternative to major power frameworks, focusing on development support and South-South cooperation.

Finally, **AUSINDEX**, the Australia-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise, is a biennial naval exercise first hosted by India in 2015. Its primary goal is to strengthen bilateral military cooperation, enhance interoperability, and improve collective defence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. The exercise underscores a shared worldview between India and Australia as open, free, and independent democracies committed to defending international law (Xavier et al., 2020). India's mapping of institutional engagements highlights a strategic effort to create "multiple independent poles" that it can engage based on common interests (Lee, 2014). This approach seeks to exert influence across various domains (security, economic, development) and geographies, reflecting a flexible and adaptive foreign policy.

OPERATIONALIZATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MULTI-ALIGNMENT STRATEGY

The effectiveness of India's multi-alignment strategy, while aiming for diversification, presents varying degrees of operational success across different institutional frameworks. This section analyses the effectiveness of security-focused versus economic-focused groupings and the challenges of managing competing priorities and strategic trade-offs.

FORUM-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS: QUAD (MILITARY) VS. BIMSTEC (ECONOMIC) EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of India's multi-alignment strategy varies significantly across different institutional frameworks, with security-focused minilaterals showing more tangible coordination, while economic groupings struggle with integration and implementation. The **QUAD** has demonstrated success as a minilateral grouping, expanding cooperation beyond its initial focus on humanitarian assistance to encompass critical areas such as health security, debt management, regional connectivity, and critical technologies (Muhibat, 2022). However, it is widely acknowledged that the Quad is "far from becoming central in countering China's growing assertiveness" in East and South Asia. India's persistent reluctance to join a formal military alliance and its emphasis on non-traditional security issues significantly limit the Quad's capability to project "hard power". This stance has led some observers to label India as an "anomalous Quad member". India's discomfort with framing the Quad as an explicitly anti-China grouping leads it to consistently advocate for a focus on non-traditional security issues and the provision of public goods. This strategic choice allows India to maintain decisional autonomy and engage ASEAN countries without alienating them.

In contrast, **BIMSTEC**, while aiming to foster economic development and connectivity between South and Southeast Asia (Chea, 2023) has faced considerable challenges in achieving its economic objectives. Despite its immense potential, encompassing 1.7 billion people and a combined GDP of \$4.5 trillion, intra-regional trade within BIMSTEC remains remarkably low, hovering at a mere 7%, which is significantly lower than ASEAN's 25%. A substantial infrastructure investment gap, estimated at approximately \$120 billion annually, poses a major impediment to integration. "While India plays a pivotal role within the organization, BIMSTEC has been notably slow in developing a formal Charter, taking 25 years to do so, and continues to grapple with significant implementation gaps. The low intra-regional trade and significant infrastructure gap in BIMSTEC stem from a lack of

political will, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient external assistance, hindering its economic integration goals” (MEA, 2024). The disparate effectiveness of Quad and BIMSTEC highlights that India's multi-alignment strategy, while offering diversification, can lead to a "diffusion" of effort if the specific objectives and capacities of each forum are not adequately aligned. This suggests that "effectiveness" is not universal but context-dependent on the nature of cooperation and the commitment of member states.

MANAGING DIVERGENCES: COMPETING PRIORITIES IN ASEAN-LED FORUMS

India's strategic imperatives, particularly its stance on China, create inherent divergences with ASEAN's preference for neutrality and centrality, complicating deeper security and economic integration. While India and ASEAN share a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, strategic divergences persist, particularly concerning their respective approaches to China. India's "confrontational approach against China" and its active participation in the Quad complicate its relationship with ASEAN, as many ASEAN nations view the Quad with apprehension. They perceive it as a potential threat to their centrality and a manoeuvre to counter China, and generally seek to avoid entanglement in major power competition. India's "confrontational approach against China" and its participation in the Quad directly cause apprehension within ASEAN, as these nations seek to avoid entanglement in major power competition. This divergence limits the depth of India-ASEAN strategic partnership, despite shared interests in regional stability.

A significant economic divergence stems from India's decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations in 2019. This decision was primarily driven by India's concerns about mounting trade deficits with China and the broader region. This remains a "considerable obstacle" to deepening India-ASEAN economic ties, and ASEAN continues to express hope that India will reconsider its position. The sharpening tensions between

India and China, coupled with the broader US-China rivalry, create new points of divergence between New Delhi and ASEAN. This dynamic necessitates urgent and honest dialogue between India and ASEAN to better understand each other's concerns and find common ground in managing these evolving challenges. Managing divergences within ASEAN-led forums is a critical challenge for India's multi-alignment strategy. It implies that India must continuously balance its own strategic autonomy and security concerns with the sensitivities and priorities of its partners, particularly ASEAN's emphasis on centrality and non-alignment in great power rivalry.

STRATEGIC TRADE-OFFS: BALANCING US TIES WITH RUSSIA/VIETNAM RELATIONS

India's multi-alignment strategy necessitates navigating complex strategic trade-offs, particularly in balancing its critical partnerships with the United States and Russia, and leveraging emerging partners like Vietnam, to maximize its strategic autonomy and national interests. "The relationship between the US, Russia, and India forms a complex strategic triangle. India faces significant trade-offs in balancing its deepening ties with the US against its enduring relationship with Russia. Former US President Donald Trump, for instance, imposed tariffs and threatened "additional penalties" on Indian exports due to its "deepening ties with Russia," specifically citing its oil purchases and military imports". Russia currently Gthe Ukraine conflict, and India remains the world's largest importer of Russian arms. The US's attempts to pressure India over its ties with Russia directly create strategic trade-offs for New Delhi.

Despite US pressure, India has largely managed to avoid CAATSA-related sanctions while continuing to purchase Russian S-400 air defence systems. This reflects India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, where it leverages its relationships to maximize national interests while minimizing the risks associated with formal alliances. India's continued reliance on Russian arms and energy and its deepening

defence ties with Vietnam are deliberate choices rooted in its pursuit of strategic autonomy and its long-term strategy to balance China.

Vietnam has emerged as a key strategic partner for India. The two nations share a "comprehensive strategic partnership," characterized by robust defence cooperation, including military equipment sales, intelligence sharing, joint naval exercises, and training. A notable example is India's gifting of an indigenously built missile corvette, INS Kirpan, to Vietnam in 2023. (Forough, 2022). This partnership is a crucial element of India's Act East policy and its broader strategy to counter Chinese dominance in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. India's ability to manage these strategic trade-offs without being forced into exclusive alignments is a testament to its diplomatic dexterity and the core tenet of its multi-alignment strategy. This suggests that diversification of partnerships is not merely about accumulating allies but about creating leverage and maintaining flexibility in a polarized international environment.

CAPACITY CHALLENGES: DIPLOMATIC BANDWIDTH, INSTITUTIONAL OVERLOAD

Despite its ambitious multi-alignment strategy, India faces significant internal capacity challenges, including economic limitations, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and diplomatic bandwidth constraints, which can lead to a gap between strategic aspirations and effective implementation. India's foreign policy is constrained by its economic and technological weaknesses. With a GDP of approximately \$3.5 trillion, significantly smaller than China's \$27 trillion, India's capacity to project power and exert diplomatic influence globally is inherently limited. This economic and technological weakness directly limits its ability to invest sufficiently in its diplomatic corps and institutional mechanisms, leading to "institutional overload" and a strain on "diplomatic bandwidth".

Internal constraints, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited funding, further dilute the impact of key foreign policy initiatives like the "Neighbourhood First" policy. India often lacks the necessary

resources and capacity to fully respond to its evolving security environment, creating a disparity between its strategic vision and its operational capabilities.

The extensive nature of India's multi-alignment strategy, involving engagement across numerous multilateral platforms such as the Quad, BRICS, SCO, G20, IORA, BIMSTEC, and FIPIC, can lead to institutional overload and strain its diplomatic bandwidth. Some critics argue that a considerable portion of diplomatic effort is expended on "performative aspects of foreign policy," such as high-profile summits, rather than on substantive, long-term implementation. This can contribute to a perceived "strategic incoherence," where tactical gains do not consistently translate into a clear and unified strategic direction.

Furthermore, India's foreign policy approach has sometimes been criticized for being reactive, responding to crises rather than proactively addressing potential flashpoints. This reactive diplomacy, often influenced by domestic political considerations and the need to garner public support, can prioritize short-term political capital over nuanced, long-term strategic interests. The capacity challenges suggest that India's multi-alignment, while strategically sound in principle, risks becoming diffused in practice if not supported by robust internal capabilities. This highlights the critical need for institutional reform and increased resource allocation to translate its strategic vision into tangible geopolitical influence.

ASSESSMENT: TACTICAL GAINS VS. STRATEGIC INCOHERENCE

India's multi-alignment strategy has demonstrably yielded tactical gains, allowing it to diversify partnerships, enhance security cooperation in specific domains (such as maritime domain awareness within the Quad), and secure diplomatic leverage in an increasingly multipolar world. This approach has been instrumental in enabling India to maintain its strategic autonomy, engaging with competing global powers without being compelled into exclusive alliances.

However, the strategy is not without its inherent risks, primarily that of strategic incoherence. The pursuit of diverse engagements across numerous forums can lead to competing priorities and challenges in managing divergences with key partners, such as ASEAN, particularly concerning their differing approaches to China. Furthermore, significant internal capacity constraints—including economic limitations, persistent bureaucratic inertia, and stretched diplomatic bandwidth—can diffuse India's efforts, hindering the full and effective implementation of its strategic vision. The tension between India's desire for strategic autonomy and external pressures from major powers (e.g., the United States regarding its ties with Russia) further complicates its ability to articulate and pursue a clear, unified strategic direction.

Ultimately, while multi-alignment offers India crucial flexibility and manoeuvrability in a complex geopolitical landscape, its long-term effectiveness hinges on India's capacity to overcome these internal limitations and consistently translate tactical successes into cohesive, overarching strategic outcomes. Without addressing these systemic challenges, the risk of strategic diffusion and incoherence remains a significant concern for India's pursuit of equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific.

MANDALA LOGIC: CONCENTRIC CIRCLES, BUFFER STATES, AND POWER PROJECTION

Kautilya's Mandala theory conceptualizes interstate relations through a system of concentric circles, with the central state, the *Vijigishu* (the aspirant conqueror or central ruler), at its core. This model posits that immediate neighbors (*Ari*) are natural enemies, while the states beyond them (*Mitra*), being the neighbors of the enemies, are considered natural allies. This framework assumes that states operate primarily out of self-interest, with their survival and expansion dependent on astute strategic manoeuvring. The core Kautilyan principle that "your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour's neighbour is your friend" directly informs India's strategic

behaviour towards Pakistan and China.¹²⁰ This leads to India actively cultivating relationships with countries like Vietnam, Japan, and Australia as "Mitra" to counterbalance its "Ari."

The Mandala theory also recognizes the critical role of "Madhyama" (middle king/mediator) and "Udasina" (neutral) states. These states, often stronger than the *Vijigishu* or its immediate adversaries, can act as crucial buffers or exert influence over both sides, thereby preventing direct conflict between major powers and contributing to a regional balance of power.

"The *Vijigishu* strives to expand its central position and project power, employing a six-fold policy (*Shadgunya*) and four means of diplomacy (*Upayas*). The *Shadgunya* includes peace (*Sandhi*), war (*Vigraha*), neutrality (*Asana*), preparation for war (*Yana*), alliance (*Samsraya*), and dual policy (*Dvaidhibhava*). The *Upayas* are conciliation (*Sama*), gifts (*Dana*), dissension (*Bheda*), and force (*Danda*)." These tools are used to manage relations, form alliances, and engage in warfare when advantageous, emphasizing a realpolitik approach focused on "gaining and maintaining power without moral confusion" (Pant, 2024).

India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, launched in 2008 and institutionalized post-2014, reflects a contemporary application of the Mandala approach. India positions itself as the *Vijigishu*, managing complex relationships with adversaries like Pakistan and China, while fostering ties with allies such as Bangladesh and Bhutan. This suggests that India's neighborhood diplomacy is not merely reactive but is guided by a deeply ingrained, pragmatic strategic tradition, providing a lens to analyze its efforts to create buffer zones and project influence in its immediate periphery, even in the modern context of non-physical boundaries and economic interdependence.

EXPLANATORY POWER VS. CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS

While the Mandala theory provides a valuable framework, its explanatory power is tested by the complexities of contemporary

Chinese assertiveness, which often transcends traditional geographical and military dimensions.

CASE STUDY 1: MALDIVES – LOSS OF "BUFFER" TO CHINA (2018–2024)

The Maldives holds immense strategic importance in the Indian Ocean, primarily due to its geographical location astride crucial sea lines of communication. Historically, this position has allowed it to function as a potential buffer state between regional powers, particularly India and China. However, recent years have witnessed a significant shift in influence, challenging this traditional buffer role.

China's influence in the Maldives has become increasingly pronounced, driven by its "string of pearls" strategy and substantial investments in Maldivian infrastructure and trade. "Notable examples include China's construction of an airport on Hulhule and the presence of a Chinese submarine near the airport in 2018, both of which raised considerable concerns for India. More recently, bilateral ties have been elevated to a "Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership," with agreements to accelerate Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation and strengthen collaboration in key sectors like tourism, the blue economy, and the digital economy". China's aggressive economic diplomacy, particularly through BRI and debt traps, is effectively undermining India's traditional influence in its immediate neighborhood, challenging the classical Mandala's concept of buffer states. China's "debt trap" diplomacy, and large-scale infrastructure investments provide significant economic leverage, directly leading to a shift in the Maldives' foreign policy away from India.

Conversely, India's traditional influence in the Maldives appears to be diminishing. The "India Out" campaign within Maldivian politics, coupled with the Maldivian President's demand for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel by March 2024, reflects a clear shift away from New Delhi. This development has caused considerable unease in India, signalling a loss of its traditional "buffer" role to China's growing economic and strategic leverage (Dahal, 2018). The Maldives

case study reveals a critical limitation of the classical Mandala theory: its static geographical assumptions fail to account for the fluid nature of modern influence, where economic interdependence and debt diplomacy can reshape alliances and undermine traditional buffer roles, even without direct military confrontation.

CASE STUDY 2: NEPAL – BALANCING CHINA VIA INFRASTRUCTURE DIPLOMACY

Nepal's geopolitical position has historically been characterized as "a yam between two boulders," a metaphor articulated by King Prithvi Narayan Shah to describe its delicate balancing act between its two large neighbours, India and China. This strategic dilemma continues to shape Nepal's foreign policy, particularly in the realm of infrastructure diplomacy.

China has actively engaged in infrastructure diplomacy in Nepal, transforming it from a land-locked to a land-linked country through various Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. "These initiatives include agreements to open Chinese seaports and dry ports for Nepal's transit trade, as well as plans for cross-Himalayan railway connectivity. The Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation, signed in December 2024, specifically focuses on infrastructure development and enhancing connectivity between Nepal and China." China's proactive BRI investments directly challenge India's traditional role as Nepal's primary development partner.

India, traditionally Nepal's most important development partner and largest trading partner, has also engaged in significant infrastructure diplomacy. "It actively supports Nepal's infrastructure development, particularly border infrastructure and cross-border train links. India has extended substantial credit lines for key projects, such as transmission lines, and has revamped transit agreements to provide Nepal with access to its internal waterways".

Nepal's strategy has been to adopt a non-alignment approach to maintain good relations with both powers, a strategy particularly

evident after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Both India and China utilize infrastructure diplomacy as a primary tool for geopolitical competition in the neighbourhood, vying for influence. Nepal, in turn, carefully navigates between these two powers, seeking to maximize the benefits derived from both sides while steadfastly maintaining its sovereignty (Kumar, 2023). The Nepal case study highlights the dynamic nature of the Mandala in a modern context, where buffer states actively leverage the competition between "Ari" and "Mitra" to their advantage. It also underscores that influence is now exerted not just through military or political means, but significantly through economic and connectivity projects.

MARITIME APPLICATION: INDIAN OCEAN NAVAL DEPLOYMENTS AS "OUTER CIRCLES"

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a vital strategic theatre for India's maritime security, handling over 80% of global maritime oil trade and nearly 10 billion tonnes of cargo annually. India's strategic vision aims to establish itself as the "most important maritime power in the region". This evolving maritime strategy reflects a dynamic application of Mandala logic, extending its "circles of influence" through naval deployments and capacity building to counter Chinese assertiveness and secure its vital maritime interests.

India has steadily expanded the operational reach of its navy in response to intensifying strategic realities and emerging security threats in the IOR. Prime Minister Modi's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, further upgraded to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) in March 2025, underscores India's commitment to cooperative security and its role as a "first responder" and "net security provider" in the IOR. The increasing presence of Chinese naval and research vessels (often perceived as dual-use spy ships) in the IOR poses a critical challenge to India's maritime security. This directly causes India to enhance its maritime security

preparedness, leading to an expanded naval reach and a shift towards a "sea denial" strategy.

India's maritime efforts, including strategic naval acquisitions such as MQ9B drones from the US and investments in infrastructure development (e.g., Agalega Island in Mauritius), are part of a larger design to enhance its operational reach and counter Chinese influence. The approach has evolved from "**sea control**" to "**sea denial**," aiming to deny control of the region to other players, as articulated by former Chief of Defence Staff Bipin Rawat. This can be interpreted as India projecting its "outer circles" of influence to deter potential adversaries. The maritime application of Mandala theory demonstrates its adaptability to modern battlespaces, where power projection extends beyond land borders. India's efforts to be a "net security provider" and its focus on maritime domain awareness are crucial for maintaining regional equilibrium and safeguarding its strategic interests in the face of growing competition.

LIMITATIONS: STATIC GEOGRAPHY VS. FLUID ALLIANCES, ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

While Kautilya's classical Mandala theory offers profound insights into interstate relations, its application in contemporary international relations faces significant limitations due to its inherent assumptions and the evolving nature of global dynamics. The underlying trend is that the classical Mandala theory, while insightful for historical contexts, struggles to explain contemporary international relations due to its static geographical assumptions and insufficient consideration of economic interdependence and fluid alliances.

The core assumption of the classical Mandala, that an "immediate neighbour is a natural enemy," is fundamentally based on static geographical proximity. "This geographical determinism struggles to account for the complexities of modern international relations, where non-contiguous states can be significant adversaries or allies." For instance, the strategic alignment between the United States and India

against China is not dictated by immediate geographical contiguity but by shared interests and threat perceptions.

Modern alliances are often fluid and issue-specific, rather than rigidly fixed by geography. While Kautilya's pragmatic advice to break disadvantageous alliances resonates with this fluidity, the classical theory does not fully capture the nuances of multi-alignment or the rise of minilateral groupings like the Quad, where interests can converge despite significant geographical distance⁵⁴. The prevalence of non-geographical, issue-based alliances⁵⁴ directly challenges the core geographical determinism of the classical Mandala.

Furthermore, the classical Mandala primarily focuses on political and military power dynamics, with less emphasis on the profound impact of economic interdependence. In the contemporary world, economic ties, persistent trade deficits, and the strategic use of debt diplomacy (as exemplified by China's Belt and Road Initiative) significantly shape state relations, often overriding purely geographical considerations. The theory's focus on territorial expansion and conquest also clashes with the modern emphasis on regional integration, shared prosperity, and non-military forms of influence. The rise of global economic interdependence and the prevalence of non-geographical, issue-based alliances directly challenge the core geographical determinism of the classical Mandala (Chakraborti, 2016). This necessitates a theoretical refinement to account for how economic leverage (e.g., China's debt traps) can alter traditional "friend-enemy" dynamics.

Finally, the classical Mandala theory is inherently state-centric and does not adequately account for the growing influence of non-state actors (such as terrorist groups or transnational criminal organizations) or global threats like climate change and pandemics, which transcend traditional geographical boundaries and require multilateral, non-military responses. The limitations of the classical Mandala highlight the need for a more dynamic and comprehensive framework to analyse India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. This implies that while

ancient wisdom provides a valuable starting point, it must be adapted and refined to remain analytically powerful in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

THE THEORETICAL REFINEMENT: NEO-MANDALA FRAMEWORK FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

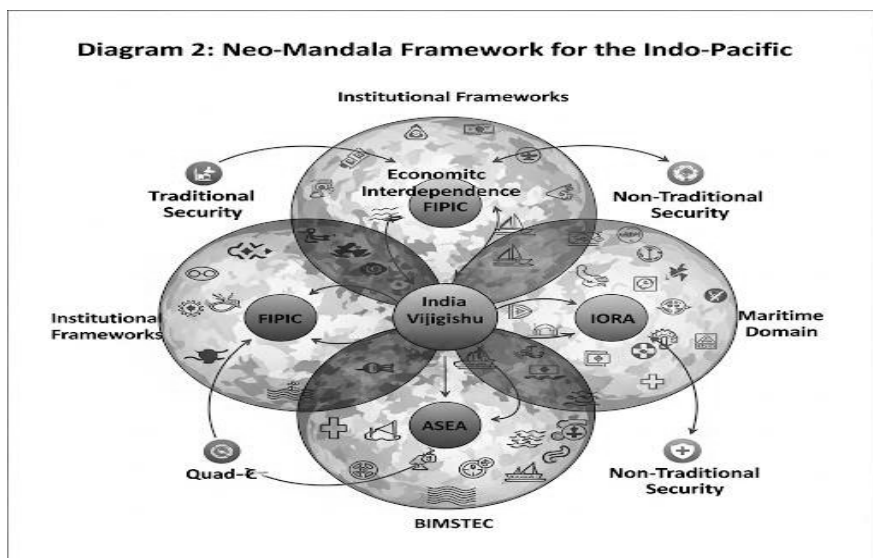
To address the limitations of the classical Mandala theory in explaining contemporary international relations, a "Neo-Mandala Framework" is proposed. This theoretical refinement aims to integrate the core logic of Kautilyan statecraft with the complex realities of the modern Indo-Pacific, acknowledging the enduring relevance of geographical proximity while incorporating fluid alliances, economic interdependence, and non-traditional security threats (Bhattarai, 2020). The limitations of the classical Mandala directly necessitate the development of a Neo-Mandala. This refinement allows for the integration of modern strategic tools like economic diplomacy and digital statecraft, providing a more comprehensive explanation for India's multi-alignment and its efforts to project influence beyond traditional military means.

This refined framework functions as a "dynamic strategic grammar" for India's foreign policy, enabling a more nuanced understanding of multi-alignment and its pursuit of equilibrium. It moves beyond rigid concentric circles to recognize overlapping spheres of influence based on shared interests, functional cooperation, and thematic alignments, rather than solely on direct geographical contiguity.

In this Neo-Mandala, India remains the "Vijigishu" (aspirant ruler), but its power projection extends beyond traditional territorial conquest to encompass economic integration, maritime security, and normative influence across the Indo-Pacific. Adversaries, or "Ari," like China, are countered not only through military means but also through economic alternatives (e.g., countering the Belt and Road Initiative) and sophisticated diplomatic balancing.

The Neo-Mandala would explicitly incorporate modern dimensions of statecraft, such as "cyber mandala" (digital statecraft), "economic mandala" (trade networks), and "climate mandala" (cooperation on environmental security). It would emphasize India's role in shaping a multipolar Indo-Pacific, where it leverages its relationships with diverse partners (e.g., Quad, IORA, FIPIC) to build collective resilience and promote a rules-based order. The concept of a "Neo-Mandala" represents a crucial theoretical innovation, adapting ancient Kautilyan wisdom to provide a more robust and relevant framework for understanding India's complex, multi-dimensional strategy in the contemporary Indo-Pacific. This framework offers a powerful indigenous theoretical lens that not only explains India's strategic behaviour but also contributes to decolonizing International Relations theory by foregrounding non-Western strategic traditions. It can serve as a guide for India to navigate its complex geopolitical environment and pursue its vision of Indo-Pacific equilibrium.

Figure 6.3: Neo-Mandala Framework for the Indo-Pacific



Source: Curated by Author

Above diagram visually illustrates the proposed Neo-Mandala Framework, demonstrating how Kautilyan principles can be adapted

to contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics. It moves beyond static geographical circles to incorporate dynamic, multi-dimensional spheres of influence, reflecting India's modern strategic approach. This visual representation enhances understanding of India's complex balancing act.

The diagram presents India as the central "Vijigishu." Instead of fixed concentric circles, it features overlapping, fluid spheres representing different dimensions of influence:

1. **TRADITIONAL SECURITY SPHERE:** Showing immediate neighbours (Pakistan, China) as "Ari" and "Mitra" (e.g., Vietnam, Japan, Australia) as partners in balancing.
2. **ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE SPHERE:** Depicting trade networks, investment flows, and debt diplomacy (e.g., BRI influence in Maldives, Nepal).
3. **MARITIME DOMAIN SPHERE:** Illustrating naval deployments, maritime security cooperation (e.g., SAGAR, Quad IPMDA), and sea denial strategies as "outer circles" of influence.
4. **NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY SPHERE:** Representing cooperation on climate change, disaster relief, and cyber security with various partners.
5. **INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS:** Overlaid on these spheres, showing minilaterals (Quad, FIPIC) and multilateral organizations (ASEAN, IORA, BIMSTEC) as mechanisms for engagement.

Arrows indicate dynamic interactions, strategic trade-offs, and the fluidity of relationships. The overall image conveys a complex, adaptive system where India strategically combines various tools to achieve equilibrium and project influence.

CROSS-CUTTING ANALYSIS: THE EQUILIBRIUM DILEMMA

India's pursuit of geopolitical equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is a complex, multi-layered endeavour, where various strategic policies and theoretical frameworks are interdependent and constantly challenged by dynamic regional and global forces. This cross-cutting analysis synthesizes the interactions between India's Act East Policy (AEP), multi-alignment strategy, engagement with ASEAN, and the underlying Kautilyan Mandala logic, while scrutinizing the disruptive role of China, internal constraints, and the nuanced US factor.

The Act East Policy, India's multi-alignment strategy, its engagement with ASEAN, and the underlying Kautilyan Mandala logic are not isolated strategic constructs but are deeply interdependent, forming a cohesive, albeit complex, framework for India's Indo-Pacific engagement. The AEP's geoeconomic goals, particularly its emphasis on enhanced connectivity and trade with Southeast Asia, are primarily pursued through India's multi-alignment strategy. This involves deepening strategic partnerships with balancing powers like the US, Japan, and Australia, while simultaneously integrating with Southeast Asia through institutional frameworks. The underlying Kautilyan Mandala logic informs the choice of these partners and strategies. For instance, the cultivation of ties with countries like Vietnam, Japan, and Australia (the "Mitra" or friend of the enemy) is a direct application of the Mandala principle to counterbalance the influence of China (the "Ari" or enemy).

The successes and failures in one area directly impact the perceived effectiveness of others. For example, delays in AEP infrastructure projects, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, due to political instability in Myanmar or bureaucratic hurdles, can undermine the overall credibility of India's connectivity initiatives. This, in turn, affects the perception of India's multi-alignment strategy as a reliable pathway for regional integration and economic growth. Similarly, the effectiveness of India's multi-alignment in forums like the Quad, particularly its focus on non-traditional security issues, is

influenced by its ability to manage divergences with ASEAN on issues like RCEP or the perception of the Quad as an anti-China grouping (Koga, 2020). The Mandala logic, while providing a historical "strategic grammar"⁵¹, must be dynamically reinterpreted (as a Neo-Mandala) to account for these modern complexities, where economic interdependence and fluid alliances can reshape traditional friend-enemy dynamics. Thus, India's pursuit of equilibrium is a continuous process of adapting its policies and leveraging its diverse partnerships, all while implicitly or explicitly drawing from its ancient strategic wisdom.

CHINA AS THE DISRUPTOR

China's assertive rise and its comprehensive strategic initiatives represent the most significant disruptive force challenging India's pursuit of equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a prime example of its multifaceted approach, extending its economic and strategic footprint across the region. The BRI, often characterized by "debt traps" and the acquisition of strategic assets, directly undermines India's influence in its immediate neighbourhood and the broader maritime domain. The case of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, now under Chinese control for 99 years due to debt default, serves as a stark warning of this strategy's implications. India views Chinese-developed ports like Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota, Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) not merely as infrastructure projects but as potential strategic outposts for Chinese naval expansion, effectively forming a "noose surrounding Indian territory".

China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region, including the deployment of research vessels often perceived as spy ships, directly challenges India's maritime security and its aspiration to be the dominant power in the IOR. This growing assertiveness, coupled with China's economic and military might, forces India to constantly adapt its strategic policies. India's Act East Policy, for instance, has evolved to become a more proactive and security-

oriented response to China's regional influence. Similarly, India's multi-alignment strategy is partly designed to build broad support for its geopolitical positions and to counter China's influence across various forums. The application of Mandala theory, particularly the concept of "Ari" (enemy), is directly informed by China's actions, leading India to cultivate "Mitra" (allies) like Japan, Australia, and Vietnam to balance Beijing's power. China's comprehensive strategy compels India to adapt its AEP, refine its multi-alignment, and re-interpret Mandala theory, highlighting Beijing's role as the primary catalyst for India's strategic adjustments in the Indo-Pacific.

INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

India's ambitious foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific are significantly hampered by a range of persistent internal constraints. These limitations, including capacity gaps, economic volatility, and the dynamics of electoral politics, often create a disparity between India's strategic aspirations and its ability to fully operationalize its vision, regardless of external opportunities or theoretical sophistication.

Firstly, **CAPACITY GAPS** are a fundamental challenge. India's economic and technological weakness, characterized by a GDP of \$4.3 trillion compared to China's \$19.23 trillion, inherently limits its financial and material capacity to project power and exert diplomatic influence on a global scale.¹⁴¹ This directly impacts its ability to invest sufficiently in its diplomatic corps, military modernization, and large-scale infrastructure projects, leading to a "strategic deficit". The lack of resources and capacity to effectively respond to its evolving security environment is a recurring theme.

Secondly, **BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA AND INEFFICIENCIES** impede the swift and effective implementation of foreign policy initiatives. Delays in obtaining permits and clearances, as well as the poor quality of infrastructure at border points, hinder crucial connectivity projects under the Act East Policy. The absence of a formally codified doctrine for the AEP itself can contribute to

confusion and slow implementation. These internal administrative hurdles can lead to prolonged negotiations and stalled projects, which China often exploits through its more nimble and well-resourced Belt and Road Initiative.

Thirdly, **ELECTORAL POLITICS AND DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS** frequently influence foreign policy decisions, sometimes leading to a more reactive rather than proactive approach. The need to garner public support, particularly during election cycles, can result in hardline stances or "performative aspects of foreign policy" that prioritize short-term political capital over nuanced, long-term strategic interests. For instance, the post-Pulwama airstrikes in 2019 were widely interpreted as both a strategic response to terrorism and a tactic to bolster domestic political support ahead of general elections. These internal limitations hinder India's ability to fully operationalize its strategic vision, regardless of external opportunities or theoretical sophistication. This highlights that overcoming internal weaknesses is as critical as managing external challenges for India to effectively assert itself in the Indo-Pacific.

THE US FACTOR: PARTNER OR PATRON? MANAGING EXPECTATIONS IN QUAD

The United States represents a critical, yet complex, factor in India's geopolitical equation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly within the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The relationship is often characterized by a delicate balance, where India seeks the US as a strategic partner while carefully managing expectations to avoid being perceived as a junior partner or compromising its strategic autonomy.

The US views the Quad as a centrepiece of its Indo-Pacific strategy, aiming to strengthen commitment to the region and uphold a rules-based order. Washington has consistently emphasized shared democratic values and principles as the foundation of the Quad. While the US has sought to invigorate its alliances and strengthen ties multilaterally, including through the Quad, its expectations for the

grouping, particularly in the military domain, often differ from India's¹⁰⁵. The US would likely welcome more robust joint military exercises and freedom-of-navigation operations to challenge China's assertiveness (Warren, 2022).

However, India's pursuit of "strategic autonomy" leads to an aversion to formal military alliances and a wariness toward formalized multilateral security engagements. India, unlike Japan and Australia, is not a US alliance partner and is the only Quad member to share a land border and ongoing conflict with China. This unique position influences its approach. India has consistently emphasized that the Quad is not "standing against something or somebody" but "standing for something," prioritizing non-traditional security issues such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. This allows New Delhi to shape the region while retaining decisional autonomy and avoiding the "securitization" of the Quad, which could alienate ASEAN countries.

The challenge of managing expectations is further complicated by US pressure on India's ties with other major powers, notably Russia. The US has imposed tariffs and threatened additional penalties on India due to its deepening energy and defence trade with Moscow. This creates strategic trade-offs for India, which relies on Russia for a significant portion of its oil imports and military equipment. Despite these pressures, India has largely managed to navigate the situation, for instance, by avoiding CAATSA-related sanctions for its S-400 missile system purchases. This balancing act highlights India's diplomatic dexterity in leveraging its multi-alignment strategy to maximize its interests while minimizing the risks of formal entanglements or being perceived as a patronized state. The US factor thus remains a critical variable, requiring continuous calibration of expectations and strategic communication to ensure the Quad's effectiveness aligns with India's broader Indo-Pacific objectives.

India's journey towards establishing geopolitical equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is a dynamic and evolving process, characterized by a

sophisticated blend of strategic pragmatism, historical wisdom, and a nuanced engagement with a complex international order. The analysis of India's Act East Policy, its multi-alignment strategy, and the enduring relevance of Kautilyan statecraft reveals a nation striving to reconcile its grand aspirations with the formidable realities of a contested geopolitical landscape.

Chapter- 7

India's economic imperative in Indo-Pacific

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

Defining India's "Economic Imperative": Growth, Resilience, Autonomy, Influence: India's economic imperative in the Indo-Pacific is a multi-layered construct driven by interconnected objectives:

1. **Growth:** Pursuing robust economic growth, targeting a \$10 trillion economy by 2030. This growth is envisioned as a foundation for broader national strength, not merely GDP increase.
2. **Resilience:** Building profound resilience within its economic ecosystem. This includes strengthening domestic manufacturing (especially in defence), securing vital supply chains, and fortifying against external shocks (natural disasters, pandemics, geopolitical pressures).
3. **Autonomy:** Ensuring foreign policy choices and economic decisions are not dictated by external pressures (particularly the US or China). Strategic autonomy implies capacity for independent choices despite deep interdependencies. For instance, navigating relations with the US while maintaining pragmatic ties with Russia for energy security.

4. **Influence:** Enhancing regional and global influence through economic partnerships and offering credible alternatives to dominant narratives. This involves leveraging India's economic weight and developmental model to project values and interests, shaping the regional order conducive to long-term goals.

The pursuit of strategic autonomy represents a sophisticated balancing act. Economic growth necessitates deeper integration into global supply chains and trade agreements, creating dependencies. India's challenge lies in leveraging these integrations for growth and influence while simultaneously building resilience and maintaining autonomy against economic coercion (Nayak, 2025). This complex interplay defines India's economic imperative in the contested Indo-Pacific.

The Core Argument: A Multi-Faceted Economic Strategy

India employs a multi-faceted economic strategy—blending engagement, competition, and coalition-building—within the Indo-Pacific to secure its interests and counter undue Chinese influence. This strategy is not monolithic but a dynamic set of policies leveraging India's unique strengths while mitigating vulnerabilities (India Foundation, 2025).

CONCEPTUALIZING THE CONTEST: ECONOMICS AS GEOPOLITICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Goeconomics Defined: The Interplay of Economic Power and Strategic Goals"Goeconomics" is commonly understood as the deliberate use of economic tools to advance geopolitical objectives, or conversely, applying geopolitical power for economic results. Broadly, it encapsulates the intricate interplay of international economics, geopolitics, and strategy (Oatley, 2024). The concept gained prominence post-Cold War, with scholars like Edward Luttwak arguing economic power was supplanting military power as the primary driver of international influence.

Academic literature defines geoeconomics as the field linking economics and geopolitics, particularly in power rivalry. It identifies diverse economic instruments for strategic goals: trade policy, investment policy, sanctions, monetary policy, energy, foreign aid, and cyber tools. The resurgence of state capitalism and global market integration has amplified these tools' potency. China, with its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and vast reach, is a preeminent practitioner, though the US and Russia also deploy them extensively.

Goeconomics serves as the dominant framework for competition in the Indo-Pacific. This perspective transcends military-centric views, emphasizing how economic tools are deployed for strategic ends. This frames the China-India rivalry not just as a security competition, but fundamentally as a geoeconomic contest. Recognizing this implies India's economic policies are integral to its national security and foreign policy, especially in countering China's influence.

China's Geoeconomic Playbook in the Indo-Pacific: BRI, Infrastructure Diplomacy, Economic Coercion

China's approach masks strategic objectives within ostensibly commercial language, leveraging economic means to shape policy behaviour of smaller states. At its heart is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), involving heavy lending for highways, railways, ports, airports, and fibre optics across continents (Alssa, 2021). While presented for connectivity and shared prosperity, these projects frequently create debt dependency, translated into political leverage.

A key mechanism is deploying China's vast network of SOEs and policy banks. These entities extend Beijing's reach by dominating strategic sectors (ports, power grids, telecommunications) in partner countries, fostering reliance for growth and essential services. This "CCP, Inc." approach blurs statecraft and commerce, embedding long-term dependencies.

Beyond infrastructure, China employs economic coercion: trade restrictions (e.g., against Australia, Lithuania) and mandating dual

civil-military use for infrastructure investments (Mohr et al., 2025). The dual-use nature of assets like deepwater ports raises concerns about future military access.

"Vaccine Diplomacy" during COVID-19 exemplifies geoeconomic statecraft. Beijing supplied 1.65 billion vaccines globally, ~33% to ASEAN, aiming to gain political influence and foster dependency, particularly in regions with territorial disputes. While framed as humanitarian aid, objectives included improving China's image and shifting pandemic blame.

The interconnectedness of China's tools and goals is defining. BRI and vaccine diplomacy are integrated components of a cohesive strategy. Provision of loans and aid creates debt dependency, translating into political leverage and strategic dominance, achieving broader geopolitical ends. This comprehensive deployment fundamentally shapes the competitive landscape.

India's Geoeconomic Response Framework

India's response is structured around four interconnected pillars:

1. **Counter-Dependency: Reducing vulnerability to Chinese economic pressure.** India pursues "managed rivalry" rather than decoupling. This pragmatic stance acknowledges the impracticality of insulating the economy from China (integral to global supply chains, India's top import source). Focus is on managing the relationship: allowing Chinese participation in non-sensitive areas while establishing "red lines" around strategic tech, telecoms, and defence (Nuruzzaman, 2022). Key actions include diversifying supply chains, attracting alternative capital, deepening trade with ASEAN, EU, and trusted Indo-Pacific partners. The Quad Critical Minerals Initiative exemplifies this, directly addressing China's control over rare earths crucial for advanced tech and defence. This "managed rivalry" is a long-term, incremental process focused on building domestic capacity and diversifying partnerships.

2. **Resilience Building: Securing supply chains, critical resources, and infrastructure.** This is proactive national security. Global disruptions like COVID-19 exposed risks of over-reliance. India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) Supply Chain Resilience Agreement fortifies global supply chains, implicitly targeting China's dominance. Initiatives within the Quad (Supply Chain Resilience Initiative - SCRI, semiconductor and critical mineral coordination) aim to shift production/sourcing towards Quad nations and partners, enhancing resilience (Ollapally, 2024). Domestically, Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes localize manufacturing, attracting global players to position India as a 'China Plus One' alternative. These build capacity in critical sectors, directly addressing supply chain security. Geopolitical vulnerabilities drive this strategic shift towards resilience (Harpaz, 2014).
3. **Influence Projection: Using economic partnerships and aid to enhance regional standing and offer alternatives.** Guided by a dual imperative: facilitating India's advancement while containing China's regional ascendancy. Participation in multilateral/minilateral groupings (Quad, IPEF) enhances influence, positioning India as a collaborator committed to a transparent, rules-based order. Connectivity projects (e.g., India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway), despite challenges, are conceived as strategic alternatives to BRI. The Quad Vaccine Partnership powerfully illustrates this: India leveraged its "Pharmacy of the World" status to manufacture/supply over 250 million COVID-19 doses to Indo-Pacific nations (MEA, 2022). This boosted India's pharmaceutical export profile, established it as a reliable health security partner, and offered a tangible alternative to China's politically driven vaccine diplomacy. This approach demonstrates "soft power" economic projection through value-based alternatives.

4. **Rule-Shaping: Promoting transparent, rules-based economic order versus perceived Chinese mercantilism.** A fundamental component is consistent advocacy for a "rules-based international order" (RIO). This is core strategy, emphasizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality, and rules based on collective consent. "This normative stance aligns with the "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision adhering to international law (UNCLOS), implicitly countering China's maritime assertions and mercantilist practices." Participation in IPEF exemplifies commitment. IPEF emphasizes resilience, sustainability, and inclusivity over tariff cuts, serving as a strategic counterweight to BRI. By promoting these norms, India implicitly delegitimizes China's practices (debt diplomacy, unilateral assertions), shaping the competitive environment to favor predictable, equitable engagement (Baruah, 2022).

The Centrality of the "China Factor" in Shaping India's Economic Calculus The "China factor" is undeniably central. China's growing influence, strategic alliance with Pakistan, and BRI/CPEC are perceived as direct challenges to India's security and regional standing, fundamentally shaping New Delhi's economic policy.

Despite security tensions and rivalry, India's economic posture towards China remains one of significant cooperation. China is consistently India's top import partner, resulting in a substantial and growing trade deficit (\$83 billion in FY2023). This creates a profound paradox: China is India's primary strategic competitor *and* a crucial economic partner.

India's heavy reliance on Chinese imports in critical sectors (electronics, solar components, pharmaceuticals) creates structural dependencies exploitable as strategic vulnerabilities.⁴¹ Chinese goods are often irreplaceable due to lack of alternatives or economic infeasibility, creating a structural reliance persisting despite rising

tensions. This economic vulnerability could undermine India's role as an effective counterweight.

This necessitates the "managed rivalry" approach. The "China factor" involves navigating a deeply integrated relationship defined by intense competition *and* unavoidable economic linkages. This explains India's emphasis on diversifying dependencies, strengthening domestic production, and seeking non-Chinese investments. India's economic calculus is a dynamic adaptation to this fundamental tension.

PILLARS OF INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC STRATEGY: INSTRUMENTS AND INITIATIVES

The Act East Policy (AEP) as the Strategic Driver

1. **Evolution: From Look East to Act East to Indo-Pacific:** The "Look East Policy" (LEP), initiated in 1991 during economic liberalization and a shift from non-alignment, was transformed into the proactive "Act East Policy" (AEP) in 2014. This evolution responded directly to China's rise/assertiveness, perceived inadequacies of the regional security order, and India's growing capabilities/aspirations. AEP differs fundamentally: expanding beyond economics to security/strategy; widening geographical focus to the entire Indo-Pacific; and elevating urgency/priority. Its overarching objective is preserving a favourable balance of power, implicitly countering China's influence. This involves securing the Indian Ocean, deepening Southeast Asian integration, strengthening partnerships with balancing powers (US, Japan, Australia, France), and pragmatically managing relations with China. The explicit securitization of eastward engagement, driven by the "China factor," demonstrates how geopolitics reshaped India's economic policy.
2. **Economic Dimensions: Connectivity, Trade, Investment, Supply Chains:** AEP emphasizes crucial connectivity projects to integrate India's Northeast with Southeast Asia (e.g., India-

Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Project). These aim to streamline trade routes, reduce logistics costs, and unlock the Northeast's economic potential, promoting deeper integration with Southeast Asian markets. The policy actively forges closer economic ties, aiming to increase trade/investment flows with East/Southeast Asia (~45% of India's foreign trade). This focus isn't just market access; it's diversifying partnerships and reducing over-reliance on any single source for critical goods. These connectivity projects serve a dual purpose: economic initiatives boosting trade/integration *and* strategic tools offering alternatives to BRI and enhancing influence by shaping regional infrastructure networks. This underscores that AEP's economic diplomacy is intertwined with geopolitical objectives.

3. **Security-Economics Nexus: Countering China as an implicit/explicit driver:** AEP is explicitly driven by the need to counter China's growing strategic influence and regional hegemony, particularly pronounced post-2020 Galwan clash. Economic outreach (expanding trade/investment) is a deliberate tool to strengthen strategic partnerships and build confidence among regional states, allowing India to balance China's influence. Connectivity projects are specifically framed as direct counters and alternatives to BRI. This overt securitization demonstrates a clear understanding that economic engagement is a powerful instrument of strategic competition. China's actions compelled India to integrate security objectives into economic policy, transforming outreach into strategic counter-balancing.

Connectivity as Counter-Strategy

- A. **Challenging BRI: The Logic behind India's Connectivity Alternatives:** India's consistent refusal to join BRI stems from fundamental concerns. The primary reason is CPEC traversing PoK, constituting a violation of sovereignty/territorial

integrity, making participation untenable. “This stance establishes a normative contrast, signaling commitment to sovereign claims. India also articulates economic/governance objections: BRI projects often lack a "level playing field" for Indian businesses and raise concerns about "debt-trap diplomacy" and opaque terms. Experiences of unsustainable debt burdens reinforce skepticism”. India advocates for transparent, financially sustainable initiatives adhering to international law, implicitly positioning its alternatives as superior and reliable (ASEAN, 2015). This counter-connectivity strategy is about establishing alternative standards and norms for infrastructure development, creating a more equitable environment contrasting China's mercantilism.

B. Key Initiatives:

- **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway & Extension to ASEAN:** Envisioned as transformative for India-Southeast Asia connectivity. This 1,360-km highway aims to boost regional integration and expand India's influence. “Promises substantial benefits: streamlining trade, reducing transit times, fostering foreign investment (e.g., India's ASEAN exports reached \$44 billion in 2022-23). However, significant delays plague the project since 2002 (original completion 2015, extended to 2019, now set for 2027). Causes: political instability/civil war in Myanmar compromising safety, financial constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, ethnic conflicts. Replacing 69 bridges along the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa road exemplifies bottlenecks”. Its strategic significance lies in bridging geographical divides, connecting India's remote Northeast to Southeast Asian markets, unlocking new trade routes, reducing reliance on maritime chokepoints. Despite setbacks, it remains crucial for India's strategic footprint and as a BRI alternative.

- **Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan (Potential vs. Reality):** Collaborative India-Japan vision announced 2017, promoting development/ connectivity/ cooperation between Africa and Asia. Framed as part of a "liberal and value-based order," emphasizing quality infrastructure, institutional connectivity, capacity building, and people-to-people ties. Widely perceived as countering BRI's extensive Africa/Indian Ocean outreach. Distinguishes itself via a more inclusive/transparent model: ensuring African nations play an active/central role, integrating their priorities (contrast to China's dominant approach). Seeks to leverage complementarity (India's skill/planning expertise + Japan's quality tech/assistance) (IFRI, 2025). A normative counter to BRI, highlighting perceived shortcomings (opaque contracts, lack of local jobs, debt burdens). Despite ambition, AAGC faces challenges translating vision into widespread reality. Described as a "vague vision" with "lackluster traction," few concrete details/widespread implementation. Officially, only Tanzania is part, surrounded by countries with internal problems. Highlights the difficulty matching rhetoric with outcomes against China's vast resources/African presence. While offering a desirable, value-driven alternative, limited progress underscores challenges scaling to rival BRI's footprint (Saran, 2024).

C. Assessing Impact & Challenges vis-à-vis Chinese Projects: India's connectivity projects, while strategically significant and normatively distinct, consistently face substantial challenges hindering impact compared to China's. Delays stem from political instability (e.g., Myanmar civil war), financial constraints, security concerns, and bureaucratic hurdles. These impede India's ability to match China's pace/scale. The quantitative disparity is stark: The Quad pledged \$50 billion for infrastructure (2022-2027), but concrete deliverables

remain minimal (subsea cable in Palau, <10 small green energy plants, totaling <\$0.5B) versus BRI's >\$600B in Indo-Pacific investments/contracts. This "implementation gap" is a major challenge. "While India emphasizes quality, transparency, sustainability, its quantitative shortfall and slow execution limit immediate counter-China impact in infrastructure. This forces re-evaluation, possibly through enhanced minilateral cooperation or innovative financing." The "scale vs. standards" dilemma is evident: China prioritizes scale/speed; India/partners prioritize high standards. The latter struggles to meet immediate, large-scale infrastructure demands, limiting counter-connectivity effectiveness (Gupta, 2025).

Trade and Investment Architecture

- A. **Bilateral FTAs/CEPAs (e.g., UAE, Australia, UK negotiations) - Securing markets, diversifying away from China:** India's proactive pursuit is a deliberate strategy to secure new markets, diversify trade relationships, and reduce over-reliance, particularly on China. Crucial for growth, resilience, and autonomy.
 - **India-UAE CEPA:** Signed Feb 2022, set ambitious targets (\$100B goods trade, \$15B services within 5 years). "Demonstrable success: Bilateral merchandise trade nearly doubled from \$43.3B (FY20-21) to \$83.7B (FY23-24); non-oil trade reached \$57.8B (FY23-24). India's exports grew avg. 25.6% post-CEPA, making UAE India's 3rd-largest trading partner, 2nd-largest export destination. Provides duty-free access for 90% of India's exports and enhanced market access for Indian services across 111 sub-sectors. Serves as a model, demonstrating success in market access/diversification".
 - **India-Australia ECTA/CECA:** ECTA signed Apr 2022, in force Dec 2022, aims to significantly boost

trade/investment. Australia provides duty-free access for ~96% of Indian goods; India offers tariff reductions on select Australian agri-products (excluding sensitive dairy/wheat/rice). Two-way trade reached \$49.1B in 2023 (up from \$24.3B in 2020). Negotiations for comprehensive CECA ongoing. Provides a level playing field against competitors with existing Australia FTAs.

- India-UK FTA (Negotiating):** Ongoing for a Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). Current trade ~\$21-24B, target \$120B by 2030. Expected to benefit Indian textiles, gems & jewellery, services via duty-free access. Aims to improve conditions for Indian professionals in UK (social security exemptions, remote work). Projected long-run GDP increase: 0.13% UK, 0.06% India.

Table 7.1: Economic Impact of India's Key Bilateral FTAs/CEPAs (UAE, Australia, UK) - Selected Metrics.

Agreement Name	Date Signed/In Force	Pre-Agreement Bilateral Trade (USD)	Post-Agreement Bilateral Trade (Latest, USD)	% Growth in Bilateral Trade	Key Export Growth Sectors	Target Trade Value (USD)	Estimated Job Creation (India)	FDI from Partner (USD)
INDIA-UAE CEPA	Feb 2022 / May 2022	\$43.3 billion (FY20-21)	\$83.7 billion (FY23-24)	93.3 %	Gems & Jewellery, Smartphones, Electrical Machinery, Textiles	\$100 billion (goods) / \$15 billion (services) by 2027	>1 million	\$18.5 billion (cumulative till Mar 2024)

Agreement Name	Date Signed/In Force	Pre-Agreement Bilateral Trade (USD)	Post-Agreement Bilateral Trade (Latest, USD)	% Growth in Bilateral Trade	Key Export Growth Sectors	Target Trade Value (USD)	Estimated Job Creation (India)	FDI from Partner (USD)
INDIA-AUSTRIA ECTA	Apr 2022 / Dec 2022	\$24.3 billion (2020)	\$49.1 billion (2023)	102%	Textiles, Gems & Jewellery, Engineering Goods	\$45-50 billion by 2027	>1 million	Not specified
INDIA-UK FTA (Negotiating)	Ongoing	\$21-24 billion (Current)	\$40 billion (2024)	~80% (projected)	Textiles, Gems & Jewellery, IT, Financial Services	\$120 billion by 2030	Substantial, esp. for Indian workers in UK	Not specified

This table provides quantifiable evidence of benefits from India's strategic trade agreements. It demonstrates active market access, export diversification, and investment attraction, directly contributing to "growth, resilience, autonomy." Showcasing diversification underscores proactive reduction of over-reliance on China.

Plurilateral/Multilateral Engagements:

i) Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF): India's participation (Supply Chains, Clean Energy, Tax/Anti-Corruption) and its strategic value against China. Launched by the US May 2022, India among 13 founding partners. Aims for collaboration across four pillars: Trade, Supply Chains, Clean Economy/Infrastructure, Tax/Anti-Corruption. Key distinction: Emphasis on resilience, sustainability, inclusivity over tariff cuts (informed by US TPP withdrawal). India's participation is strategic, directly countering

China's influence (vs. BRI/RCEP). By excluding China, IPEF aligns with Quad's "free and open Indo-Pacific" goal, addressing China's SCS actions/coercion. Enhances AEP and strengthens ASEAN/Quad ties. Notably, India joined Pillars II (Supply Chains), III (Clean Economy), IV (Fair Economy) but maintains observer status in Trade Pillar. Reflects domestic protectionist concerns and desire to safeguard industry, even foregoing trade liberalization benefits. "The Supply Chain Resilience Agreement (2023) is crucial, designed to fortify global chains and reduce India's dependence on China in pharma/tech. Expected to make IPEF chains more resilient/integrated. India's IPEF stance highlights a trade-off: Deeper integration (enhancing market access/competitiveness) vs. domestic industrial protection". This impacts IPEF's overall effectiveness as a counter. India's selective participation reveals a nuanced approach, leveraging partnerships strategically while managing domestic sensitivities.

ii) RCEP Rejection: Rationale (protecting domestic industry, countering Chinese dominance) and Consequences (missed opportunities?). India's Nov 2019 withdrawal, despite being part of the drafting committee since 2011, was significant geopolitically/economically (RCEP = world's largest bloc: 1/3 global GDP/trade). Rationale rooted in domestic interests/fear of Chinese dominance: Fear of cheap Chinese import flood harming domestic industries (e.g., dairy facing NZ/Australia competition). Major concern: Existing/large trade deficit with RCEP nations, especially China (~\$100B). Data showed strong growth in India's imports of high-skill/tech manufactures from China, widening deficits. Fear RCEP would exacerbate imbalance and cause "withering away of sunshine sectors."⁶¹ Highlights prioritization of domestic protection over regional integration. Reflects strategic choice to safeguard nascent sectors against overwhelming competition (Chinese goods potentially rerouted via ASEAN). While hailed by Indian industries/farmers, many analysts viewed it as a "policy mistake" and missed opportunity. Consequences: Forewent integration into regional/global value chains, access to new markets, enhanced

competitiveness. Limited ability to shape regional trade norms. Underscores tension between "self-reliance" (Atmanirbhar Bharat) and aspirations for regional economic influence.

Resource Security and Supply Chain Resilience

- Diversifying Energy Sources (e.g., Russian oil pivot, LNG partnerships with US/Australia) - Reducing Middle East/Strait of Malacca vulnerability. As the world's 3rd-largest oil importer (85% import dependency), energy security is paramount. Driven by this imperative, India dramatically increased Russian crude imports: from negligible 0.2% pre-2022 to 36% by June 2025. Primarily driven by discounted prices, offering an economic alternative to Middle East suppliers. Simultaneously reduces vulnerability to Middle East volatility and chokepoints like Strait of Malacca (Panda, 2023). However, created geopolitical tensions with US/EU (sanctions, potential consequences like tariffs). Forces India to weigh affordability against geopolitical alignment. India prioritizes energy security, citing declining domestic production and projected oil demand (6.66 million bpd by 2030). India's role refining Russian oil for export to EU/US inadvertently stabilizes global prices. Beyond Russia: Increased oil imports from Africa (330,000 bpd Feb 2025); Accelerating renewables investment (50% non-fossil power by 2030); Expanding nuclear capacity (100 GW by 2047 via US/France collaboration). This multi-pronged strategy underscores energy security as critical for strategic autonomy and complex geopolitical balancing.
- Securing Critical Minerals and Technology (Quad collaboration, bilateral deals). Security of critical minerals/tech access is a new frontier in geoeconomic competition. China's dominance over rare earths/essential materials poses vulnerabilities for India's defence/tech/green sectors. In response, India engages collaboratively: *Quad*

Critical Minerals Initiative (Australia, India, Japan, US) aims to strengthen economic security/collective resilience by reducing over-reliance on single sources (China). Seeks interoperable, trusted equipment supplier ecosystem. *US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)* deepens strategic tech partnership/defence industrial cooperation, including semiconductor/critical mineral supply chains. These are proactive measures to prevent coercion and ensure technological autonomy/industrial growth. Securing these is essential for defence, competitiveness, and economic resilience, making collaboration with partners key to mitigating Chinese influence.

- "China+1" Strategy: Positioning India as an alternative manufacturing hub. This global business trend involves MNCs diversifying manufacturing/supply chains from China. India positions itself as a preferred hub, especially for Japanese/Korean investors. A direct economic counter to Chinese dominance. Domestic PLI schemes facilitate this shift, localizing manufacturing and attracting global players. Broader geopolitical realignments/concerns about China reliance (e.g., US tariffs) nudge countries towards India (NewsOnAir, 2025). Contributes to supply chain stability and diversified exports. However, realizing full potential depends on addressing domestic challenges: onerous regulatory framework, bureaucratic hurdles, infrastructure gaps, high costs (land, energy, quality-adjusted labour) (Prabhakar, 2025). Without substantial reforms improving ease of business and competitiveness, India risks missing this opportunity despite favourable tailwinds.

Navigating Regional Architecture: ASEAN Centrality and Minilateralism

ASEAN Centrality: Cornerstone or Constraint?

- **Rationale for India: Stability, Rule of Law, Market Access, Counterweight to Major Powers.** ASEAN centrality remains foundational. Driven by belief that a strong, unified, rules-based ASEAN is essential for regional stability/order. Provides crucial multilateral framework, fostering predictability/adherence to international law, aligning with India's interests. Economically vital: ASEAN accounts for 11% of India's global trade, reflecting significant interdependence and market access. India views ASEAN as critical for promoting a multipolar Indo-Pacific, acting as a collective counterweight to any single power (China). This strategic anchor allows pursuit of economic/security objectives cooperatively, reinforcing diplomatic standing.
- **Economic Engagement via ASEAN: FTAs (AIFTA), Sectoral Partnerships, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation.** Multifaceted engagement: *ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA)* (2010) is a cornerstone, expanding ties via goods/services/investment agreements (>90% tariff liberalization). Bilateral trade grew to \$81.3B (FY2017-18), target \$200B within a decade. *Sectoral Partnerships* across agriculture, energy, S&T, transport, HRD. *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)* (2000): Involves India, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam. Focus: tourism, culture, education, transport/communications; expanded to health, traditional medicine, agriculture, water, skill development. Aims to leverage historical/cultural linkages for broader economic/strategic relationships, promoting infrastructure/cross-border movement. This multi-layered strategy deepens interdependence and goodwill, indirectly enhancing counter-China efforts.

- **Limitations & the China Challenge: ASEAN's internal divisions, economic dependence on China, slow pace of integration -- Hindering India's ability to effectively counter China solely through ASEAN-led mechanisms.** Despite commitment, effectiveness in robustly countering China is constrained: *Internal Divisions* on contentious issues (e.g., SCS disputes) limit cohesive action. *Deep Economic Dependence* on China: Many members reliant; Beijing leverages this to prevent collective action. *Economic Disparity*: China-ASEAN trade (\$975.3B, 2022) vastly exceeds India-ASEAN (\$131.5B, 2022), making it hard to offset Chinese influence. *Infrastructure Gap*: India's connectivity projects in SE Asia nascent vs. BRI. *Slow Pace*: Consensus-driven decision-making hinders rapid/agile responses. India's trade deficit with China (\$83B FY2023) and Chinese goods rerouted via ASEAN FTAs exacerbate structural reliance. These limitations reveal relying *solely* on ASEAN-led mechanisms is insufficient. This necessitates India's "dual-track" approach, using minilaterals to complement ASEAN centrality.
 - **Minilateral Engagements: The "Dual-Track" Approach** Limitations of ASEAN-centric mechanisms led to the rise of minilaterals engagement as well as bilateral trade agreement. This "dual-track" approach allows agile, focused cooperation with like-minded partners, complementing ASEAN centrality (Kumar, 2025).
- A. **The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue):** Beyond Security to Economic Statecraft: Evolved from security-focused dialogue to a platform for economic statecraft.
- **Focus Areas:** Expanded agenda: infrastructure, Critical & Emerging Tech (CET), climate, health, cybersecurity, space, Maritime Domain Awareness (economic implications for trade/energy security).

- **Countering BRI:** Aims to offer "transparent, high-quality" infrastructure alternatives. Projects, while smaller, designed to set high standards and address debt diplomacy concerns. Leverages national development finance institutions (US DFC, Australia AIFFP, India EXIM, Japan JBIC) for subsidized capital/blended finance.
- **Assessing Economic Tangibility and Strategic Signal:** Record of tangible achievements limited. Investments often symbolic; "mismatch between rhetoric and delivery." Collective Quad economic engagement (\$284.26B, 2017-2024) significantly less than BRI (~\$440B same period). Creates "perception gap," limiting outreach/influence. However, the partnership sends a powerful strategic signal: united stance among democracies against coercion/pressure tactics. Symbolic power currently outweighs economic delivery. To be an effective counterweight, the Quad must bridge the gap: robust financing, accelerated project implementation.

Other Minilaterals:

- **I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, US):** Established July 2022. Focuses on "bankable projects" addressing global challenges: water, energy, transport, space, health, food security, tech. Aims to mobilize private capital for modern infrastructure, low-carbon development, public health. Key Projects: UAE's \$2B investment in Indian food parks (climate-smart tech to reduce waste/conserve water); Hybrid Renewable Energy Project in Gujarat (wind/solar + battery storage). Supports India's 500 GW non-fossil target by 2030, positioning it as a renewable supply chain hub. Represents a focused, project-oriented approach, leveraging complementary strengths (UAE capital, Israel tech, India market/dynamism) for tangible outcomes. Pragmatic, results-oriented economic diplomacy.

- **India-France-UAE Trilateral:** Formally established Feb 2023. Focus: Energy (solar, nuclear), climate change, biodiversity, technology. Significant defence cooperation: enhancing compatibility, joint development, co-production. Extends to maritime security (vital for trade routes/energy). Conducted first joint maritime exercise (Gulf of Oman, Jun 2023) and air exercise (Arabian Sea, Jan 2024). Exemplifies flexible, issue-specific minilateralism, enabling targeted cooperation. Allows India to deepen strategic partnerships in the crucial Western Indian Ocean/Middle East.
- **Synergy vs. Friction:** Minilaterals (Quad, I2U2, India-France-UAE) gain momentum as a pragmatic response to ASEAN limitations. They offer less bureaucracy, focused action on complex challenges (great power rivalry, climate, digitalization). Multiplication allows intensified solicitations, potentially bypassing/weakening traditional ASEAN multilateralism (Wlit, 2025) However, they often *complement* ASEAN centrality. While ASEAN's divisions/dependence limit collective counterweight ability, minilaterals fill specific gaps ASEAN cannot: tangible, faster results in critical tech, infrastructure, supply chain resilience. Many strategies (e.g., France's) emphasize "inclusive" approaches contributing to multilateral consolidation and affirm "ASEAN centrality."⁸⁰ India's "dual-track" approach reflects this: minilaterals provide agility for targeted statecraft/capability building with like-minded partners, while upholding ASEAN centrality for stability/rules-based order. The challenge is ensuring minilaterals reinforce a free, open, inclusive order with transparent alternatives, not exclusive blocs fragmenting the region (Pandit, 2024).

Case Studies in Countering Chinese Assertion

Case Study 1: The Quad's Infrastructure Initiatives vs. BRI in the Pacific Islands/Southeast Asia

- **Chinese Assertion:** BRI has significant footprint (>\$600B Indo-Pacific investments/contracts). ASEAN nations often welcome it for connectivity/financing, addressing critical deficits. Concerns exist over "debt bombs"/opacity, though China shows some renegotiation flexibility.
- **Quad's Countering Action:** Committed to offering transparent, sustainable, high-quality alternatives. Pledged \$50B (2022-2027). Specifics: subsea cable in Palau, limited small green energy plants. Aims to leverage development finance corporations for cooperation, spreading risk/reducing costs/offering better terms.
- **Analysis: Comparing approaches, reception, effectiveness:** Highlights "scale vs. standards" dilemma. BRI: large-scale, rapid financing/implementation, less transparency, potential debt. Addresses immediate, vast infrastructure gaps, making it highly attractive. Quad: Emphasizes "high standards, transparency, sustainability. "Qualitative advantage, but hampered by quantitative shortfall/slower implementation. Collective footprint minimal vs. BRI's scale. "Implementation gap" undermines ability to rival BRI quantitatively. Reception reflects this: BRI's scale/speed often make it the only viable immediate option despite debt concerns. Quad initiatives welcomed for quality/transparency but seen as limited scope/outcome ("mismatch") (Curtis, 2022). India's influence via Quad infrastructure is more about normative standard-setting/long-term alternative than direct quantitative competition. Bridging the implementation gap through accelerated delivery/substantial financing (e.g., 2+1 trilateral models) is crucial for effectiveness.

Case Study 2: India's Engagement with ASEAN in the Maritime Domain (e.g., SIMBEX, MILAN, SAGAR vision) - Economic Security Implications

- **Chinese Assertion:** Aggressive SCS actions (increased surveillance, unilateral assertions) threaten freedom of navigation. Crucial conduit for >\$3T ship-borne commerce (including India's vital energy imports). China's "maritime silk road" seeks hegemony over routes, raising coercion/access concerns.
- **India's Countering Action:** Encapsulated in SAGAR (2015) and expanded MAHASAGAR (2025) initiatives for mutually beneficial blue economy connectivity, countering China's maritime silk road. Intensified defence cooperation: joint exercises SIMBEX (Singapore), MILAN (multilateral naval, incl. HADR). Arms sales (e.g., BrahMos to Philippines), assistance (helicopters). Cooperation with ASEAN on blue economy, coastal surveillance, information sharing for Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).
- **Analysis: How maritime security cooperation underpins economic freedom:** Demonstrates maritime security is a fundamental *economic* imperative. Securing Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) directly impacts trade flows/energy security vital for India's well-being. Enhancing MDA, fostering interoperability, building capacity contribute directly to a secure/predictable commercial environment, countering coercion.¹⁰⁵ Engagement reinforces ASEAN centrality by promoting rules-based order/stability.¹⁰⁵ However, ASEAN's divisions/dependence limit its effectiveness as a sole counter.¹⁰⁵ India's strategy pragmatically includes bilateral/minilateral maritime engagements (e.g., with Vietnam, Philippines) complementing ASEAN mechanisms.⁴ SAGAR/MAHASAGAR integrate security/economic objectives, underscoring secure maritime domain as prerequisite for prosperity.

UPI Integration with ASEAN Partners (2023-Present)

- **Chinese Assertion:** Promotes Alipay/WeChat Pay as part of "Digital Silk Road," aiming to embed financial dependence/data control. Gained traction in SE Asia (e.g., Indonesia approvals with conditions), globalizing Chinese tech firms for geopolitical influence.
- **India's Countering Action:** Strategic linkage of UPI with international partners. Integration with Singapore's PayNow (2023) enabled real-time cross-border transactions. Ongoing discussions with Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan for similar links; aspirations for ASEAN-wide integration. RBI enabled inbound UPI for travelers. Aims to reduce costs, promote financial inclusivity, lessen USD reliance.
- **Economic Interest Perspective:** *Enhanced Market Access & Reputation:* Facilitates seamless cross-border transactions, boosting trade/tourism, lowering barriers for SMEs/consumers. Strengthens financial connectivity/market reach. *Supply Chain Leadership & Influence:* Offers indigenous, open-source UPI as a non-Western/non-Chinese alternative emphasizing interoperability, transparency, local currency. Directly counters China's proprietary, data-centric models, projecting India's leadership in Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Aligns with strategic autonomy and shaping a rules-based digital economic order.

Quad Vaccine Partnership (2021-2022)

- **Chinese Assertion:** "Vaccine Diplomacy": Supplied 1.65B doses globally (~33% to ASEAN). Aimed to gain political influence/foster dependency, especially in disputed regions, improve image, shift blame.
- **India's Countering Action:** Leveraged "Pharmacy of the World" status via Quad collaboration. Manufactured/supplied >250 million doses (primarily Covishield) to Indo-Pacific

nations. Committed to donating 500,000 doses under the initiative. Quad aimed to expand manufacturing/assist vaccinations, committing >1.2B doses globally.

- **Economic Interest Perspective:** *Enhanced Market Access & Reputation:* Boosted pharmaceutical export profile, established India as reliable, high-quality health security partner, building goodwill/reputation. *Supply Chain Leadership:* Showcased India as a critical node in resilient health supply chains, countering China's attempt to monopolize supply and associated influence, contributing to diversification/resilience. Highlights growing importance of non-traditional security domains (health) in geoeconomic competition. Providing essential public goods translates into diplomatic influence and economic benefits (MEA, 2022).

Constraints, Challenges, and Internal Imperatives

Domestic Economic Challenges: Manufacturing base, infrastructure gaps, bureaucratic hurdles, protectionist pressures. Ambition to project economic power constrained by:

- **Weak Manufacturing Base:** Sector share ~13% of GDP (~half of China's), never exceeded 18%. Limits workforce absorption and global value chain competitiveness.
- **Structural Impediments:** Onerous regulatory framework → bureaucratic hurdles. High costs (land, energy, quality-adjusted labour). Significant infrastructure gaps (inadequate industrial parks, transport networks). Poor rankings in "firm strategy/structure/rivalry," "global trade policy" (high tariffs, RCEP absence), "factor conditions" (R&D, finance, land), "regulatory quality" (customs/tax).
- **Protectionist Pressures:** High tariffs (e.g., autos 125%), domestic content requirements violate WTO norms, reduce export competitiveness. Evident in RCEP rejection/IPEF Trade Pillar opt-out, driven by protectionism. These primary

constraints impact capacity to capitalize on "China+1" or deliver connectivity projects rapidly, limiting external economic power projection.

Resource Limitations: Financial and institutional capacity vs. China. Ability to compete impacted by:

- **Financial Asymmetry:** India's investment share of GDP (~30%) consistently lower than China's (>30% since 1992, >40% last 15 yrs). Private corporate investment static/falling as GDP share. Quad collective commitment (\$284.26B, 2017-2024) pales vs. BRI (>\$600B). Directly impacts capacity for large-scale infrastructure/aid matching China.
- **Institutional Capacity Gaps:** Struggles delivering basic public services/human welfare baseline, indicating governance/effectiveness challenges. Suggests bottlenecks even with more resources. Strategy must leverage comparative advantages, targeted partnerships, qualitative differences, not match China's scale everywhere.

Navigating Great Power Competition: Balancing relations with US, Russia, and managing direct engagement with China.

Pursuit tied to delicate balancing act:

- **Strategic Autonomy Tested:** Traditional "strategic autonomy" (non-alignment) tested in world demanding alignment.
- **Energy Dilemma:** Russian oil pivot (36% imports by Jun 2025) driven by affordability/security creates tensions with US/EU (sanctions, potential tariffs). Forces choice between affordability and alignment.
- **China Interdependence:** While seeking diversification, Chinese goods/components remain crucial for key manufacturing sectors. Economic interdependence persists

despite border disputes/mistrust. Participation in BRICS highlights complexity.

- **US Expectations:** US views India as vital democratic counterweight/rising power. Deepening defence/trade ties/Quad come with expectations for closer alignment (supporting sanctions, curbing Chinese tech). Ambiguity now scrutinized.

Strategy involves preserving independent foreign policy while extracting gains: deepening Middle East energy ties, expanding SE Asia/Africa exports, fast-tracking domestic manufacturing (defence/electronics), building strategic tech corridors with allies not demanding full alignment.

Sovereignty Concerns & Non-Alignment Legacy: Impact on deep economic integration and alliance-like behaviour. Choices shaped by ingrained sovereignty concerns and non-alignment legacy.

- **Non-Alignment Legacy:** Articulated by Nehru, aimed at preserving freedom of action, avoiding military blocs during Cold War. Continues influencing contemporary policy.
- **BRI Refusal:** Primary objection: CPEC through PoK = violation of sovereignty/territorial integrity. Principle supersedes potential benefits.
- **Cautious Integration:** Legacy translates into caution towards deep economic integration potentially compromising autonomy/perceived alliance-like behavior. Evident in RCEP rejection/IPEF Trade Pillar opt-out. Driven by protectionism but also desire to reduce vulnerabilities. Emphasis on avoiding "allegiance" means wariness of arrangements imposing political conditionalities.

Provides flexibility and protects sovereign interests but can limit ability to leverage multilateral trade agreements/form deeper blocs enhancing competitiveness/counter-China

efforts. Challenge lies in balancing autonomy with integration benefits.

Evaluation of AEP

A. Evidence of Effectiveness:

- *Diversification*: Instrumental in driving trade/investment diversification. Successful UAE/Australia FTAs/CEPAs. UAE CEPA doubled trade (\$83.7B FY23-24), grew exports 25.6% avg. Australia ECTA boosted trade to \$49.1B (2023). Contributes to reducing over-reliance.
- *Connectivity*: Pursued strategic projects (KMTTP, IMT Highway) creating alternative routes/fostering integration. KMTTP aims to reduce NER isolation/logistics costs. IMT Highway promises SE Asia linkage despite delays.
- *Market Access*: AIFTA/bilaterals expanded market access, contributing to significant trade growth (e.g., ASEAN trade target \$200B).
- *Countering China*: Explicit securitization driven by "China factor."¹⁰² Offers normative counter-narrative via transparency/quality (vs. BRI). Initiatives like UPI integration with ASEAN (PayNow) demonstrate leveraging DPI for influence/non-Chinese digital alternatives. Quad Vaccine Partnership showcased reliable health security partnership, countering China's diplomacy.

B. Limitations:

- *Implementation Gap & Scale*: Connectivity projects face delays/resource limitations/bureaucracy. Hinders offering large-scale, rapid alternatives matching BRI's \$600B+. Quad infrastructure pledges show commitment-delivery gap.
- *Trade Imbalance*: ASEAN trade (\$131.5B, 2022) significantly lags China-ASEAN (\$975.3B). Overall China trade deficit (\$83B) remains vulnerability.

- *Protectionist Pressures:* RCEP rejection/IPEF Trade Pillar opt-out limit deeper integration enhancing market access/competitiveness.

C. Synthesis: AEP successful in articulating strategic intent, diversifying partnerships, establishing normative counter-narrative. However, effectiveness in quantitatively challenging China's dominance/rapidly delivering large-scale alternatives remains limited by domestic constraints, resources, and China's scale. Success lies more in qualitative standard-setting/partnership building than direct quantitative competition.⁹³

ASEAN centrality and India's economic interests while effectively countering China? Analysis of benefits vs. constraints.

Benefits:

- *Stability & Rule of Law:* Provides stable, rules-based framework, crucial for secure trade/investment.
- *Market Access:* AIFTA/sectoral partnerships expanded access. Trade growth (target \$200B) crucial for economic growth.
- *Counterweight:* Platform for promoting multipolarity, collective counterweight to major powers (China). Strengthens India's regional position.

Constraints:

- *Internal Divisions & China Dependence:* Divisions (e.g., SCS) limit cohesive action. Deep economic dependence on China leveraged by Beijing prevents unified front.
- *Economic Disparity:* Vast gap between India-ASEAN (\$131.5B) and China-ASEAN (\$975.3B) trade (2022). Hard to offset Chinese influence.
- *Slow Pace & Infrastructure Gap:* Consensus-driven decision-making hinders agile responses. India's infrastructure projects nascent vs. BRI.

- *Structural Reliance*: China trade deficit (\$83B); Chinese goods rerouted via ASEAN FTAs.

Synthesis

ASEAN centrality is a necessary foundational principle providing stability, market access, and a counter-narrative platform. However, it is *insufficient on its own* to effectively/robustly counter China due to inherent dynamics, deep economic ties with Beijing, and scale disparity. This limitation *directly justifies* India's "dual-track" approach. Minilaterals (Quad, I2U2, trilateral) complement ASEAN centrality as well as bilateral trade agreement by offering agile, focused avenues for economic statecraft against China. While cornerstone for normative value/access, its direct countering effectiveness is constrained, requiring pragmatic augmentation.⁹⁴

Synthesis: Refining the understanding of these hypotheses based on the evidence presented, particularly regarding the China factor. India's economic imperative strategy is complex and dynamic, fundamentally shaped by the pervasive "China factor." It's a nuanced blend of engagement, competition, and coalition-building to secure growth, resilience, autonomy, and influence.

Act East Policy (AEP)

Demonstrates strategic intent to secure interests and counter China. Evolution from "Look East" to securitized "Act East" directly responds to China's assertiveness. Effective in diversifying partnerships (via FTAs) and establishing a normative counter-narrative (transparency/quality). However, constrained by "implementation gap," resource limitations, and domestic challenges (manufacturing, protectionism), limiting quantitative challenge to China's dominance.

ASEAN Centrality

Remains vital for stable rules-based engagement and crucial market access. Allows promotion of multipolarity. Nevertheless, ASEAN's divisions and deep China dependence limit its collective

counterweight ability, necessitating India's pragmatic "dual-track" approach.

Minilaterals

Crucial augmentation. Quad, I2U2, India-France-UAE trilateral offer agile platforms for targeted statecraft: building resilience (supply chains, critical minerals), offering alternatives (quality infrastructure, UPI), leveraging complementary strengths. While Quad's economic deliverables lag its signaling, I2U2 shows promise with tangible project outcomes (food security, clean energy). They complement ASEAN by addressing specific gaps ASEAN cannot effectively fill.

Core Driver - China Factor

- Navigates the paradox of economic interdependence with China alongside intense strategic competition. Strives for growth/influence while building resilience/preserving autonomy in a bipolarizing world. The centrality of the economic imperative for India's quest will continue driving this multi-faceted approach, requiring continuous adaptation.⁹⁶

India's economic strategy is a core pillar of its Indo-Pacific vision, driven by the imperative to secure growth, resilience, autonomy, and influence against China's expanding geoeconomic footprint. Employing a multi-faceted approach blending engagement, competition, and coalition-building, it manifests through the evolved Act East Policy, strategic connectivity projects, diversified trade/investment architectures, resource security focus, and navigating regional architecture via ASEAN centrality augmented by minilateralism.

Chapter- 8

Conclusion: India, Indo-Pacific and Future of Global Order

GEOPOLITICAL EVOLUTION AND STRATEGIC POSTURE

India's geopolitical trajectory in the Indo-Pacific is marked by a profound recalibration of its strategic priorities, driven by its unique geographic position and the evolving regional power dynamics.

India's geographic centrality at the midpoint of the Indian Ocean places it "at the heart of a key geostrategic and geoeconomic domain of the 21st century". It commands a strategic vantage point over vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) like the Strait of Malacca and Strait of Hormuz, which are essential for international trade and energy security. This centrality bestows upon it an inherent structural advantage, positioning it as a pivotal power with the potential to act as a **"net security provider and rule-shaper"**. India's geographic centrality is a given, but its strategic importance is a product of the "maritimization" of the world and the rise of China's naval power. This means India's inherent advantage is now coupled with a compelling imperative to secure its maritime lifelines. The shift from a **"largely continental posture"** to a **"maritime mandala"** is not merely a policy choice but a strategic necessity for national prosperity and security. This indicates that India's maritime strategy is no longer a secondary concern but a primary pillar of its national security, directly linking its economic future to its naval capabilities and regional

maritime partnerships. The duties of maritime awareness and responsibility are now non-negotiable.

India's foreign policy has evolved from its historical non-alignment to a sophisticated "multi-alignment" or "omni-alignment" strategy. This approach enables India to maintain a variety of partnerships with different great powers without being constrained by an exclusive alliance system. It represents a deliberate attempt to shape rather than merely respond to the regional environment, indicative of a proactive and assertive foreign policy. This pragmatic multi-alignment is evident in India's deepening ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quad, while simultaneously preserving diplomatic space to engage with China. India's **low-resolution liberalism** reflects this, prioritizing diversity and inclusivity over rigid ideological alignments, allowing it greater flexibility and broader appeal among diverse regional actors. Multi-alignment is more than just balancing; it is about creating **multiple independent** poles that India can engage based on common interests, thereby reducing its vulnerability to coercion from any single power. The **Dharma-Realpolitik Paradox** explains how India balances its values (e.g., rules-based order) with pragmatic power politics (e.g., engaging Russia despite Western pressure), enabling this active hedging. This suggests that multi-alignment is not a sign of indecision but a sophisticated, adaptive strategy for a rising middle power in a fluid multipolar international system. It allows India to project influence and secure interests without committing to rigid, potentially constraining, alliances.

India's security posture has become steadily maritime-oriented, reflected in the surge of joint naval exercises, capacity building for littoral partners, and participation in maritime domain awareness initiatives. These moves are incremental yet cumulative, expanding India's reach through partnerships, information sharing, and platform interoperability rather than through abrupt basing or formal alliance commitments. Examples include India's robust bilateral defence cooperation with Vietnam (BrahMos missile sales, military logistics agreements, joint training), Singapore (Comprehensive Strategic

Partnership, SIMBEX), Indonesia (Samudra Shakti, GARUD SHAKTI), and the Philippines (BrahMos sales, support on South China Sea ruling, JDCC elevation). The Quad Leaders' Vision (2023) further underscores continued maritime cooperation and shared democratic norms as components of this approach⁹. While India meticulously avoids formal alliances of containment to preserve its strategic autonomy, the consistent focus of its minilateral and bilateral defence partnerships is on enhancing maritime security and implicitly while shifting from sea control to sea denial, if not explicitly, countering China's growing assertiveness. This indicates that multi-alignment, in practice, functions as a de-facto alignment with like-minded powers to balance against China's influence. This implies that India's strategic autonomy is not about isolation but about choosing the terms of its engagement. **Minilateralism provides the flexibility to achieve security objectives without the political baggage of formal alliances, allowing India to be a capable security partner while maintaining its independent foreign policy.**

Kautilya's Mandala theory, an indigenous Indian strategic framework from the ancient *Arthashastra*, offers a unique lens for understanding India's strategic behaviour. Its core insight—that immediate neighbours are often competitors (*Ari*), while distant powers can act as allies (*Mitra*)—finds clear resonance in India's foreign policy. India's strained relations with Pakistan and China (proximate *Ari*) and its deepening partnerships with geographically distant powers like the United States, Japan, and France (contemporary *Mitra*) are not disparate policies but a coherent, historically informed Kautilyan strategy. The concept of a "maritime mandala" represents a crucial adaptation, emphasizing cooperation in global commons and interdependent maritime trade, rather than solely state-on-state rivalry. This reflects an understanding that while the underlying realist logic of self-interest remains, the means to achieve it in the maritime domain are more liberal-leaning, involving collective security and institutional arrangements. The Mandala theory provides a strategic grammar that shapes India's choices about where to invest diplomatic capital and

how to sequence capability development. This is not just a historical curiosity; it is an active, endogenous framework that informs India's contemporary foreign policy, allowing it to interpret and respond to modern geopolitical challenges through a culturally resonant lens. The Neo-Mandala Framework further refines this by integrating modern dimensions like economic interdependence and non-traditional threats. This implies that India's foreign policy is not merely reactive to Western International Relations theories but is deeply rooted in its own civilizational heritage. The Mandala provides a unique, non-Western theoretical lens that offers profound understandings into India's pragmatic and flexible approach to alliances and rivalries, contributing to the decolonization of International Relations theory.

GEOECONOMIC IMPERATIVES AND RESPONSES

India's economic imperative in the Indo-Pacific is a multi-layered construct driven by interconnected objectives of growth, resilience, autonomy, and influence. Its strategy is a multi-faceted blend of engagement, competition, and coalition-building to secure these interests and counter undue Chinese influence.

The Act East Policy (AEP), a transformation from the earlier "Look East Policy," signifies India's strategic maturation, moving from passive engagement to a more proactive and comprehensive approach that integrates economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions. It aims to foster economic development of India's North Eastern Region (NER), transforming it into a vital gateway for trade, connectivity, and cultural ties with ASEAN nations. AEP emphasizes crucial connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, designed to streamline trade routes, reduce logistics costs, and unlock the Northeast's economic potential. These projects serve a dual purpose: economic initiatives boosting trade and integration, and strategic tools offering alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and enhancing India's influence by shaping regional infrastructure networks. While AEP articulates ambitious goals and

has achieved measurable benefits for selected sectors, it faces significant infrastructural shortfalls at home, tariff and non-tariff barriers, and India's non-membership of RCEP. **This creates an implementation gap where strategic intent outpaces tangible delivery, particularly when compared to China's scale and speed.** The delays in projects like KMMTTP due to political instability in Myanmar are stark examples. This indicates that India's geoeconomic strategy, though conceptually sound, is vulnerable to internal capacity constraints and external geopolitical volatility. To fully realize its potential, India must address domestic bottlenecks and enhance its project execution capabilities to offer credible, large-scale alternatives to Chinese initiatives. The scale versus standards dilemma must be strategically managed.

ASEAN centrality remains indispensable for India's economic strategy, as ASEAN states are both the immediate market gateway to East Asia and the institutional theatre in which regional rules and norms are negotiated. India consistently reaffirms ASEAN's centrality in its regional approach and actively supports **the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**. Economic engagement is multifaceted, including the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) (2010), sectoral partnerships, and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). India views ASEAN as critical for promoting a multipolar Indo-Pacific, acting as a collective counterweight to any single power (China). While ASEAN centrality provides stability, market access, and a platform for dialogue, its effectiveness in robustly countering China is constrained by internal divisions on contentious issues, deep economic dependence on China, and vast economic disparity in trade volumes compared to China-ASEAN trade. **This means that relying solely on ASEAN-led mechanisms is insufficient for India to effectively counter China. This implies that India's dual-track approach, which complements ASEAN centrality with agile minilateral engagements (e.g., Quad, I2U2), is a pragmatic necessity.** ASEAN provides the broad, inclusive framework, but minilaterals offer the focused, results-

oriented platforms needed to address specific challenges and counter China more effectively.

China's geoeconomic instruments, including BRI infrastructure financing, industrial diplomacy, and deepening supply-chain links, exert asymmetric leverage on several Indian neighbours and across the Indo-Pacific. BRI is characterized by debt-trap diplomacy, where loans often exceed recipient nations' repayment capabilities, leading to concessions and increased dependence. New Delhi has responded with a multi-pronged geoeconomic framework centered on:

- **Counter-Dependency:** Pursuing managed rivalry rather than decoupling from China, focusing on diversifying supply chains and attracting alternative capital. The Quad Critical Minerals Initiative exemplifies this, addressing China's control over rare earths.
- **Resilience Building:** Fortifying global supply chains through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) Supply Chain Resilience Agreement.
- **Influence Projection:** Using economic partnerships and aid to enhance regional standing, offering credible alternatives to dominant narratives (e.g., Quad Vaccine Partnership, UPI integration with ASEAN partners).
- **Rule-Shaping:** Promoting a transparent, rules-based economic order, emphasizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, and adherence to international law (UNCLOS).

Despite security tensions and rivalry, China remains India's top import partner, resulting in a substantial and growing trade deficit (\$83 billion in FY2023). This creates a profound paradox: China is India's primary strategic competitor and a crucial economic partner. India's heavy reliance on Chinese imports in critical sectors creates structural dependencies that are exploitable as strategic vulnerabilities. **This indicates that India's geoeconomic response is not about outright confrontation or decoupling but about managed rivalry and de-**

risking. The challenge is to leverage economic integration for growth while simultaneously building resilience and maintaining autonomy against potential economic coercion. This necessitates a continuous, adaptive strategy rather than a one-time solution.

STRATEGIC BALANCING, REGIONAL ORDERS, AND NORMATIVE INFLUENCE

India's strategic balancing operates on multiple dimensions simultaneously, reflecting a sophisticated approach to shaping the regional order.

This balancing encompasses operational aspects (naval cooperation and logistics), institutional engagement (support for ASEAN centrality and multilateral fora), and normative influence (promoting an inclusive Free, Open, Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIP) narrative). India's emphasis on inclusivity differentiates it from zero-sum framing and gives smaller states more diplomatic comfort when engaging with New Delhi. The Quad and AUKUS represent functional groupings that reinforce deterrence and capability development. AUKUS, in particular, has reconfigured allied cooperation around advanced undersea and technology collaboration, with implications for regional naval balances. India's consistent emphasis on an inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific is not merely rhetorical. It is a deliberate narrative and norms diplomacy designed to counter China's more assertive, often unilateral, actions. By promoting these norms, India implicitly delegitimizes China's practices (debt diplomacy, unilateral assertions), shaping the competitive environment to favour predictable, equitable engagement. This is a form of soft power that has tangible geopolitical outcomes. This implies that India's strategic balancing goes beyond military and economic power; it actively seeks to shape the ideational landscape of the Indo-Pacific. This normative influence enhances its diplomatic leverage and broadens its appeal, particularly to smaller states wary of great power rivalry.

Soft power—cultural ties, development assistance, technical cooperation, and scholarship programmes—remains a vital strategic

instrument. India's investments in Pacific Island Countries (PICs), through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) and other channels, produce durable goodwill and practical capacity building. These engagements, while modest in scale compared to China's capital deployments, contribute to a broader strategy of presence that is not militarised yet strengthens India's normative position. FIPIC is presented as a uniquely Indian, non-militarized alternative to major power frameworks, focusing on development support and South-South cooperation. While China employs debt diplomacy and large-scale infrastructure projects to gain influence, India's soft power approach, though slower and less financially intensive, aims to build durable goodwill and sustained human linkages. This is a long-term strategy to counter China's often transactional relationships, fostering deeper trust and alignment based on shared values and developmental partnership. This implies that India recognizes that sustainable influence in the Indo-Pacific is not solely about hard power or economic might, but also about building relationships rooted in trust and shared values. Soft power is a crucial, cost-effective complement to its hard power and geoeconomic strategies, contributing to a more resilient and inclusive regional order.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: CHARTING INDIA'S FUTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The recommendations below are practical, incremental, and sequenced, designed to be politically feasible while enhancing India's strategic and economic posture in the Indo-Pacific, with India's national interest paramount.

ENHANCING STRATEGIC AND DEFENCE POSTURE

- **Comprehensive Maritime Logistics Network:** India must negotiate long-term logistics and replenishment agreements with friendly littoral states such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, and Indonesia. This also involves exploring permissive access arrangements in select Southeast Asian ports (e.g., Sabang in Indonesia, Changi in Singapore) and

expanding “littoral infrastructure grants” to create durable logistics nodes without establishing formal bases. This enhances India's operational reach and sustained presence, crucial for its "sea denial" strategy.

- **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Interoperability:** Invest in a hub-and-spoke MDA architecture that binds India's naval sensors, partner assets, and commercial maritime data into an interoperable information exchange. Prioritize low-cost coastal radar, satellite access agreements, and collaborative oceanographic research with partners. This is vital for securing critical SLOCs and countering the increasing presence of Chinese naval and research vessels in the IOR.
- **Focused Capability Build-Up:** Prioritize anti-submarine warfare (ASW), undersea surveillance, and a modest fleet of long-endurance surface combatants and maritime patrol aircraft. This capability mix is more useful for Indian strategic purposes than parity in carrier or strike groups, addressing a persistent weakness in India's naval capabilities. Strategic naval acquisitions like MQ9B drones from the US are part of this design.
- **Deepen Minilateral Defence Cooperation:** Institutionalise working groups under QUAD and IORA for logistics, humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR), maritime security, and cyber resilience. Formalise regular staff exchanges, common logistics standards, and combined exercises targeted at non-traditional threats. This leverages the "dual-track" approach to enhance specific capabilities and interoperability without forming rigid alliances.

BOLSTERING ECONOMIC AND CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES

- **Sectoral Minilateral Agreements:** Pursue pragmatic minilateral trade and investment agreements in high-value

sectors (digital economy, pharmaceuticals, green energy supply chains) with like-minded partners. These can be faster to conclude and easier to implement than omnibus FTAs, addressing the implementation gap and bureaucratic hurdles. The I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, US) initiative, focusing on bankable projects in water, energy, and food security, is a prime example of this approach.

- **Finance and Project Sustainability:** Link infrastructure financing to transparent viability assessments and grant-loan mixes that avoid debt trap risks for partners. Strengthen India-Japan AAGC collaboration as a high-quality alternative to BRI financing models. This directly counters China's debt-trap diplomacy and promotes a rules-based, sustainable development model.
- **Technology Cooperation:** Accelerate semiconductor, battery, and critical mineral partnerships with partners (Japan, Australia, US) and foster secure supply chains for critical inputs. The Quad's supply chain workstreams and the US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) are useful platforms for such initiatives. This is crucial for reducing vulnerability to China's dominance in critical minerals and ensuring technological autonomy.
- **Incentivise Private Sector Engagement:** Offer risk-sharing instruments (credit guarantees, blended finance) to incentivise Indian private sector firms to invest in regional connectivity projects. This addresses India's resource limitations and leverages the dynamism of its private sector to complement government-led initiatives, helping to bridge the connectivity gap with China.

ADVANCING DIPLOMATIC, DEVELOPMENTAL, AND NORMATIVE INFLUENCE

- **Scale Up Pacific Outreach:** Convert short-term project assistance into multi-year development partnerships with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) emphasizing renewable energy, climate resilience, and fisheries management. Expand ITEC scholarships and vocational training to create sustained human linkages. This builds durable goodwill and practical capacity, strengthening India's normative position and offering alternatives to Chinese influence.
- **Narrative and Norms Diplomacy:** Promote an Indian narrative of “quality infrastructure” and a rules-based maritime order. Use discursive resources—cultural diplomacy, historical ties, and public diplomacy—to counter simplistic containment narratives and highlight India's commitment to inclusive regionalism. This includes emphasizing India's "millennia-old connection" with Southeast Asia and its "co-production" of the Indo-Pacific concept.
- **Institutional Investment in ASEAN:** Continue to support ASEAN centrality through capacity building for the ASEAN secretariat, joint projects, and regular high-level dialogues that keep ASEAN at the convening center of regional architecture. This reinforces a stable, rules-based framework crucial for India's economic and strategic interests, despite ASEAN's internal divisions and economic dependence on China.

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