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INDO- PACIFIC AS THE “EPICENTER”

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This paper analyzes India’s gradual transition from its traditional non-aligned stance to a more dynamic and multi-aligned foreign policy approach in the Indo- Pacific, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As the Asia-Pacific evolves into a competitive geopolitical arena—shaped by China’s growing influence, shifting U.S. strategic priorities, and the expanding role of middle powers—India has emerged as a central player influencing the regional security framework.

Applying a combined theoretical framework of realism and constructivism, the study examines India’s rising strategic presence through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and key bilateral ties with Japan, Australia, ASEAN states, and the United States. The research explores how India strives to maintain a balance of power while promoting inclusivity, democratic values, and multilateral cooperation in the region.

Drawing on policy documents, interviews, multilateral statements, and think-tank analyses, the paper assesses the consequences of India’s multi-alignment strategy for the political order, institutional networks, and stability of the wider Indo-Pacific. It contends that New Delhi’s vision extends beyond simply countering China’s maritime expansion; rather, India seeks to shape the normative architecture of regional order. Consequently, India is positioning itself not just as a strategic balancer, but as a co-creator of a diverse and cooperative Indo-Pacific future.

Key Words - Asia Pacific Geopolitics, regional security architecture, strategic autonomy, Indo pacific.

Introduction

The term Indo-Pacific was first introduced by German strategist Karl Haushofer in the 1920s through his work *Indopazifischen Raum*. The idea resurfaced prominently in the address delivered by Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the Indian Parliament, titled *Confluence of Two Seas*, over a decade ago. Its prominence further increased when the United States articulated the concept clearly in its strategic policy document, after which other major global powers also released their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. At its core, the Indo-Pacific framework places primary emphasis on maritime spaces and oceanic connectivity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDO-PACIFIC

1. Geopolitical and Strategic Significance

China has rapidly expanded its influence across the Indo-Pacific and is perceived as assertive, reactive, and revisionist in its intent. It aims to reshape the existing rules-based global order through its vision of a “community of shared future for mankind.” At the same time, U.S. dominance in the region has seen gradual decline, motivating Washington to reclaim its strategic foothold. As global power politics tend to function as a zero-sum game, the Indo-Pacific has evolved into a central arena for major power competition. Both China and the United States are now actively attempting to consolidate and expand their spheres of influence, creating conditions that reflect the possibility of a Thucydides Trap, a concept popularized by Graham T. Allison.

This rivalry has increasingly penetrated multilateral institutions, resulting in deadlock, rigidity and reduced effectiveness. The confrontation has also become unusually public, with leaders of both states openly criticizing each other. For example, President Xi Jinping accused the U.S. of “all-round containment, encirclement and suppression,” calling it an unprecedented challenge to China’s development.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in *The Indian Way* highlights China’s ambition to achieve global power status, rooted in the belief that maritime dominance is a prerequisite for global leadership – reflecting strategic adherence to Alfred Mahan’s sea power doctrine. This perception has prompted the U.S. to revive and reshape its Indo-Pacific strategy, leveraging the Indian and Pacific Oceans to counterbalance Chinese expansion.

China has begun asserting control over the South China Sea through island-building, military deployments, and disregard for international rulings such as the 2016 PCA verdict, while simultaneously expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean. It has cultivated political, economic and security partnerships with almost all littoral states including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar. India and France remain influential actors here, yet China's presence continues to grow, particularly due to the region's importance – nearly 80% of China's oil imports transit these waters.

China's investments in 13 major ports across the Indian Ocean, its controversial loan practices (termed debt-trap diplomacy), and its encirclement of India through development projects known as the String of Pearls strategy are viewed with deep concern in New Delhi. India's apprehensions intensified recently when it objected to suspected Chinese surveillance infrastructure in Myanmar's Coco Islands and the docking of the spy ship Yuan Wang 5 at Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port.

2. Economic Importance

The Indo-Pacific is one of the most economically vital regions in the world. It comprises 38 countries, covers 44% of the planet's surface, hosts 65% of the global population, accounts for 62% of global GDP and handles 46% of world merchandise trade. Given this scale, the region influences global economic stability directly, making its security a collective international priority.

3. Cultural Relevance

Historically, the Indo-Pacific has been the cradle of several prosperous and powerful civilizations. Contemporary initiatives aim to revive this cultural legacy, with India playing a significant leadership role. Traditionally united through cultural interactions, the region is now envisioned to integrate further through a combination of cultural revitalization and economic interdependence. A cohesive Indo-Pacific promises a safer, more stable and prosperous future.

4. Opportunities for North–South and South–South Cooperation

The region facilitates both North-South and South-South collaboration, particularly as many Indo-Pacific nations are developing or least-developed economies. Meanwhile, developed states have strategic interests in maritime security, trade, emerging technologies, supply chains,

cyber security, connectivity, architecture of global governance, and blue economy initiatives. The mutual alignment of interests has created space for deeper cooperation.

The rise of China and relative decline of U.S. power are key factors behind the shifting global focus toward the Indo-Pacific. China's maritime expansion has alarmed regional and extra-regional actors alike, accelerating the relevance of maritime diplomacy. State behaviour in the Indo-Pacific increasingly reflects identity-based perceptions (a constructivist lens) particularly for extra-regional players like the UK and EU, whereas neorealist motivations dominate resident powers such as India. A notable manifestation of this is the emergence of the Quad, which gained renewed momentum especially after the 2020 Galwan clash, enhancing India's strategic flexibility.

Modi's Indo-Pacific Vision: Doctrinal Shift and Strategic Conduct From Look East to Act East

India's outreach toward East and Southeast Asia witnessed a major transformation when the Look East Policy (LEP), formulated in the early 1990s during economic liberalization, was upgraded to the more proactive Act East Policy (AEP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While LEP primarily focused on political and economic engagement with ASEAN, it lacked strategic depth and maritime orientation.

The AEP broadened India's engagement across East Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands, emphasizing defense cooperation, maritime security, and multilateral partnerships. India institutionalized security dialogues with Japan and Australia, strengthened defence ties with the United States through LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA, and expanded military exercises – signalling a departure from earlier strategic caution toward an assertive role in Indo-Pacific security architecture.

AEP represents recognition that economic outreach must be supported by strategic influence if India intends to shape and lead Indo-Pacific regional order.

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

RESPONSES OF STATES TO INDO PACIFIC INDIA:-

India's historical connection with the oceans dates back to pre-Vedic times, when maritime trade flourished across the Indus Valley and along the Indian peninsula. This longstanding

oceanic orientation continues to shape India's contemporary approach to the Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Modi has stated that India's vision for the Indo-Pacific—spanning from the coast of Africa to the Americas—is fundamentally inclusive. Rooted in Vedantic philosophy, which upholds the idea of universal unity and diversity (Ekam Satyam, Viprah Bahudha Vadanti – Truth is one, but the wise express it in many forms), India's civilizational values embody pluralism, coexistence, openness, and dialogue. These cultural foundations, alongside India's democratic ethos, guide its foreign policy behaviour in the region.

India's engagement is structured around the Five S principles:

Samman (Respect), Samvad (Dialogue), Sahayog (Cooperation), Shanti (Peace), and Samridhhi (Prosperity) — reflecting a commitment to peaceful cooperation and adherence to international law in global affairs.

Precepts from PM Modi Speech in Shangri-La Dialogue

India is a prominent maritime power in the Indo-Pacific, making its involvement in the region not only strategic but also inevitable. Prime Minister Narendra Modi first articulated India's Indo-Pacific vision during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, emphasizing openness, inclusiveness, and ASEAN centrality as the core principles. This was later institutionalized through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, structured around seven priority pillars:

1. Maritime Security,
2. Maritime Ecology,
3. Maritime Resources,
4. Capacity Building & Resource Sharing,
5. Disaster Risk Reduction & Management,
6. Science, Technology & Academic Cooperation, and
7. Trade, Connectivity & Maritime Transport.

India's Indo-Pacific outlook is inclusive rather than confrontational, envisioned as omnidirectional diplomacy aimed at engaging multiple actors without being directed against any one state. It harmonizes various foreign policy approaches—including Neighbourhood First, Act East, SAGAR, Connect Central Asia, Act Far East, Link West, and Extended Neighbourhood—into a unified strategic framework serving India's maritime interests. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar noted, the Indo-Pacific represents “a logical progression beyond Act East,” expanding India's engagement beyond South Asia.

India's strategy operates through four broad pillars:

- 1) Strengthening domestic capabilities, such as modernizing naval infrastructure and securing island territories.
- 2) Expanding bilateral and multilateral partnerships across political, economic, cultural, and security domains.
- 3) Supporting the development of neighbouring littoral states, including through economic and defence assistance.
- 4) Upholding a rules-based maritime order, ensuring freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution.

As Harsh V. Pant observes, India has moved away from earlier reluctance to enter binding defence arrangements; post-2014, it now actively leverages strategic partnerships—a shift reflecting multi-alignment rather than traditional non-alignment.

While India engages the broader Indo-Pacific, it assigns particular priority to the Indian Ocean, viewing stability in this region as fundamental. Jaishankar asserts that India's Indo-Pacific approach relies upon “getting its Indian Ocean strategy right,” operationalized through SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) launched in 2015. Through SAGAR, India focuses on connectivity, security cooperation, and capacity building with countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Mozambique. The Indian Navy plays a lead role as the region's first responder, addressing challenges such as piracy, trafficking, terrorism, cyber threats, and maritime surveillance. India has supported littoral nations by supplying radars, patrol vessels, coastal surveillance systems, and through information-sharing mechanisms. Regional resilience, as Prabir De argues, requires major economies to invest in infrastructure for collective development.

Jaishankar characterizes the Indian Ocean as a space of culture, commerce, and community, advocating cooperation rooted in empathy and interdependence rather than domination. He envisions the Ocean regaining its historic role as a crossroads of civilizations, making it central to Indo-Pacific stability.

A defining element of India's regional strategy is its commitment to ASEAN centrality. Positioned between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ASEAN has traditionally shaped regional dialogue. Although its capacity has recently been questioned—particularly after the Myanmar

military coup—India continues engagement through the Act East Policy, prioritizing connectivity and trade via BIMSTEC, MGC, EAS, ADMM-Plus, and bilateral platforms. The India-ASEAN FTA (2010) further underscores the region’s economic relevance. As Jaishankar notes, it remains essential to assure ASEAN of its central role in Indo-Pacific processes.

To balance China’s growing influence, particularly through the Maritime Silk Route, India has leveraged historical-cultural linkages via initiatives like Project Mausam and the Cotton Route, emphasizing people-to-people ties, cultural revival, and soft power diplomacy. Under IPOI, maritime security stands out due to challenges such as piracy, climate threats, trafficking, and reconnaissance operations under the guise of maritime awareness. India has strengthened cooperative security mechanisms through joint patrols, anti-piracy missions, information-sharing networks like IFC-IOR (2018), and participation in IONS, enhancing interoperability and maritime infrastructure.

Climate change poses acute risks—nearly 70% of global natural disasters occur in this region—making humanitarian relief and climate financing central aspects of India's outreach. The Forum for India-Pacific Island Countries (FIPIC), established in 2014, seeks to enhance resilience among Pacific states through sustainable development, disaster preparedness and climate adaptation.

Going forward, a key challenge for India will be managing its strategic balancing between cooperation and competition with China—engaging Beijing in multilateral forums like BRICS, SCO, and RIC, while simultaneously strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. The Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrated India’s strategic autonomy, reinforcing its independent foreign policy positioning.

US Approach

The United States conceptualizes its Indo-Pacific vision as a **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)**, primarily geared toward checking China’s rise. US strategic documents identify China as a challenge to regional stability, freedom of navigation, and the rules-based order. The US approach involves:

Enhancing security and economic cooperation, especially with treaty allies (Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand) and strategic partners like India and Indonesia. The US operationalizes engagement through groupings such as **QUAD** and

AUKUS—the former a normative security coalition on climate, health, technology, cyber, and infrastructure; the latter a defence pact focused on nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. Economic initiatives like the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)**, **Blue Dot Network**, and **Build Back Better World (B3W)** aim to strengthen regional connectivity and digital infrastructure.

Investing in democratic and social institutions, including civil society, education, and media. **Building climate resilience**, given the region’s centrality to global climate efforts. While the US highlights ambitions toward climate cooperation, it has been criticized for slow implementation relative to commitments.

Japan’s Approach

Japan’s Indo-Pacific doctrine—also termed Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)—rests on two pillars:

Economic engagement and connectivity: Through the Quality Infrastructure Initiative, Japan promotes infrastructure development across the region. Tokyo pledged USD 70 billion by 2030 for Indo-Pacific infrastructure and participates in multilateral frameworks like RCEP, CPTPP, and SCRI, the latter aimed at diversifying supply chains away from China.

Peace and stability: Japan supports regional capacity building in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, anti-piracy operations, counter-terrorism, and non-proliferation.

Other actors—including ASEAN, Australia, the EU, and Canada—have also released their respective Indo-Pacific visions, further highlighting the region’s growing geopolitical centrality.

CONCLUSION:

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a pivotal arena in contemporary global geopolitics, with international political attention increasingly shifting toward this region. The future trajectory of global power structures will largely depend on how developments unfold within the Indo-Pacific. The alignment and conflict of interests among states will shape their strategic behaviour and influence the region’s political outcomes. Therefore, it is essential for countries to prioritise areas of cooperation that foster regional unity rather than deepen divisions. Major regional powers must ensure that the global order does not regress into polarisation reminiscent of the Cold War. Sustaining space for dialogue and negotiation is critical to preventing miscalculations and maintaining stability.

Despite its strategic prominence, the Indo-Pacific faces several non-traditional security challenges including climate change, marine pollution, food and energy insecurity, poverty, and resource vulnerability. An excessive focus on geopolitics may further exacerbate these issues. Hence, regional powers should strike a balance between geostrategic competition and sustainable development, using their geographic positioning strategically while navigating external incentives offered by developed states.

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