

**INDIA'S RISE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:
STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN ACTION**

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*India's strategic location gives it the potential to play a pivotal role,
but potential is not action*

— Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister
and founder of Singapore.¹

Abstract

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, India is asserting itself as a major player in the Indo-Pacific. This chapter examines India's evolving foreign policy, characterized by "strategic autonomy," and its multifaceted approach to regional engagement. It analyzes India's key partnerships, security challenges, and efforts to bolster its global stature and regional supremacy. The chapter also explores the complexities and opportunities that lie ahead as India flexes its newfound geopolitical muscle to shape the regional order.

Introduction

"It is inevitable," said Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, in March 1949, "for India to play an important global role not because of any ambition of hers, but because of the force of circumstances, because of geography, because of history."²

In the decades since, a world defined by shifting power dynamics and complex challenges has seen India rise as an emerging power on the global stage. From its early adherence to the non-alignment doctrine championed by Nehru, India's foreign policy has evolved to expand those principles to "strategic autonomy."³

Dubbed non-alignment 2.0, India's foreign policy emphasizes "multialignment," maintaining autonomy while engaging with all

major powers. It carefully balances relationships with Russia, the United States, and China without falling into any exclusive camp. This approach reflects India's adaptability to navigating the 21st-century complexities with independence and flexibility, fostering diverse partnerships while protecting its national interests.

This chapter examines the evolution of India's foreign policy and its strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. It explores India's key partnerships, its role in regional security, and the challenges it faces in achieving its objectives. By analyzing India's balancing act with major powers like the United States and China, as well as its regional initiatives, this chapter sheds light on India's aspirations to shape the regional order and enhance its global stature.

India's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is evolving as a central pillar of its foreign policy, focusing on securing its interests in a region marked by growing competition, economic opportunities, and strategic challenges. With its geographic positioning, economic ambitions, and security imperatives, India views the Indo-Pacific as vital to its aspirations as a global power.

India's approach integrates economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions, all aimed at bolstering its global stature and fostering regional stability and prosperity. Deeply entwined in this approach are some key strands—business, migration, and security—which mark a historic shift to India's doctrine of strategic autonomy. This doctrine empowers India to pursue its interests and shape the regional order independently. To operationalize its Indo-Pacific strategy, India has adopted a multi-pronged approach:

- *NEIGHBORHOOD FIRST POLICY*: Launched in 2014, this policy emphasizes strengthening relationships with its South Asian neighbors by promoting trade, connectivity, cultural exchange, and joint security initiatives. Key partners include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

However, tensions with Pakistan remain, particularly over cross-border terrorism, and continue to obstruct cooperation within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the eight-nation regional group aimed at fostering economic and political collaboration. To bypass these challenges, India has shifted toward bilateral and sub-regional initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework. These smaller, more focused partnerships enable India to advance its Neighborhood First goals while fostering regional collaboration on manageable scales.

- *ACT EAST POLICY*: This policy forms the cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Initiated in 1991, it has evolved from a primarily economic engagement to a comprehensive strategic partnership with Southeast Asia, evidenced by India's participation in numerous regional forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and its free trade agreements with ASEAN. Furthermore, India has increased investment in infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, aiming to improve connectivity and boost trade. Defense cooperation has also been strengthened through joint military exercises with countries like Vietnam and Singapore and technology-sharing agreements.⁴
- *THE QUADRILATERAL GROUPING (QUAD)*: India's participation in the Quad with the United States, Japan, and Australia signifies its commitment to a rules-based order and maritime security. The Quad serves as a platform for cooperation on critical issues, including maritime domain awareness,

counterterrorism, and emerging technologies. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad launched a vaccine initiative to provide doses to countries in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating its commitment to regional leadership.⁵

- *MARITIME SECURITY AND CONNECTIVITY*: Recognizing the critical importance of sea lanes of communication in the Indo-Pacific, India has intensified efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness, coastal security, and disaster response. This includes investments in port development and connectivity initiatives such as the Sagarmala project, which aims to modernize India's port infrastructure by building new ports and terminals, modernizing existing ones, and enhancing connectivity with inland waterways and road networks. This project is crucial for facilitating trade, promoting economic growth, and ensuring the security of maritime trade routes.⁶ India has also increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and conducted joint exercises with partner navies to enhance interoperability and address shared security challenges.
- *INDIA AS A NET SECURITY PROVIDER*: India seeks to position itself as a net security provider in the region. This involves actively participating in regional forums, conducting capacity-building initiatives with partner nations, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁷ For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, India launched Operation Gambhir, deploying naval ships and aircraft to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to affected countries in the region.⁸ India also regularly conducts joint military exercises with countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, focusing on capacity building and enhancing interoperability. These efforts demonstrate India's desire to play a leading role in addressing shared challenges.

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Landscape

The Indo-Pacific region has become the epicenter of a geopolitical contest, with major powers vying for influence and seeking to shape the regional architecture. India's strategic location, with its growing economic and military power, makes it a key player. However, it faces a complex landscape with various actors pursuing their own agendas.

- *THE UNITED STATES*: The United States seeks to maintain its predominant position in the region through its “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. This involves strengthening alliances with countries like Japan and Australia through initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS, a trilateral security pact aimed at enhancing cooperation on defense technologies. The United States is also deepening partnerships with India and several Southeast Asian nations through increased military exercises, technology sharing, and economic initiatives. It has increased its military presence in the region and actively challenges China's assertive actions in the South China Sea through freedom of navigation operations. Furthermore, Washington is promoting economic initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to foster regional economic integration and counter China's economic influence.
- *CHINA*: China is extending its influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure project aimed at connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe through a network of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure projects. The BRI, perceived as a challenge to the U.S.-led order, is seen as a way for China to expand its economic and strategic influence in the region by financing and building critical infrastructure. China is also modernizing its military, expanding its naval capabilities, and asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea, leading to increased tensions

with neighboring countries. China's construction of artificial islands and deployment of military assets in the disputed waters have raised concerns about its intentions and its willingness to use force to achieve its objectives.

- *OTHER ACTORS:* Beyond the U.S.-China rivalry, other actors are also playing significant roles. Japan and Australia are key U.S. allies, actively participating in security initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS. Japan has increased its defense spending and is developing its own long-range strike capabilities, while Australia is acquiring nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement. Southeast Asian nations seek to balance their relationships with both the United States and China, prioritizing economic growth and stability while navigating the complexities of the regional power dynamics. These countries are cautious about taking sides and are seeking to maintain good relations with both major powers.

India, in this context, is pursuing an approach of strategic autonomy, leveraging its partnerships and actively engaging in regional initiatives to promote its interests and contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific. This requires a delicate balancing act, as India seeks to maintain good relations with the United States while not isolating China as it tries to resolve current border conflicts, all while safeguarding its own sovereignty and security. India's participation in the Quad allows it to cooperate with like-minded nations on security issues, while its Act East policy strengthens its ties with Southeast Asia. India is also enhancing its own military capabilities and deepening its defense partnerships with countries like the United States, France, and Russia to ensure its security and strategic autonomy in this competitive environment.

Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

While cooperative engagement is central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy, it also faces a complex security environment that necessitates a robust defense posture. India must contend with territorial disputes, military standoffs, terrorism, cyber threats, and the destabilizing effects of climate change. This requires a multifaceted approach that balances military modernization, diplomatic efforts, and economic resilience.

Traditional Security Challenges

Traditional security challenges, including territorial disputes, military standoffs, and the proliferation of weapons, continue to pose significant challenges to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. These challenges require India to maintain a robust defense posture and actively engage in diplomatic efforts to mitigate tensions and prevent conflict.

China

China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, including its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea and its military modernization, poses a significant challenge to India. The border dispute between India and China, marked by recent clashes in the Galwan Valley and the Tawang sector, remains a persistent source of tension.⁹ Beyond territorial disputes, China's economic heft and technological competition, particularly in areas like artificial intelligence (AI) and 5G, also pose challenges to India's security and economic interests.

Pakistan

The enduring conflict over Kashmir continues to pose a major security threat to India. This is exacerbated by Pakistan's growing strategic partnership with China, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's BRI.

CPEC, with its development of Gwadar Port, enhances Pakistan and China's ability to project power in the Arabian Sea, posing a challenge to India's maritime interests.¹⁰

Furthermore, Pakistan is actively modernizing its naval forces with Chinese support, acquiring advanced submarines and warships in an attempt to counterbalance India's dominance in the Indian Ocean.¹¹ This raises concerns about a potential shift in the regional naval balance and the possibility of increased Sino-Pakistan naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

The potential for Pakistan to become a full proxy for Chinese influence in the region adds another layer of complexity to India's strategic calculus.¹² Pakistan's ability to leverage Chinese support, particularly in its military modernization efforts, could significantly impact India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. This necessitates that India carefully consider the possibility of coordinated actions between Pakistan and China when formulating its security strategies.

Afghanistan

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has raised serious concerns in New Delhi about the resurgence of terrorism and instability in the region. India fears that Afghanistan could become a safe haven for anti-Indian terrorist groups, potentially serving as a launchpad for cross-border attacks. This fear is not unfounded, as neighborhood groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which have historically targeted India, particularly in the Kashmir region, may find renewed support and operational space.

India has long viewed a stable and peaceful Afghanistan as essential for regional security, particularly in preventing the spread of extremist ideologies that could destabilize its own borders. The current situation presents a significant challenge to this objective, as

the Taliban's ideology and their potential support for terrorist groups pose a direct threat to India's security.

The evolving dynamics in Afghanistan also have implications for India's maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. The instability in the region could disrupt trade routes and energy supplies that pass through the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, further complicating India's security environment. Moreover, the potential for increased Chinese influence in Afghanistan, particularly through economic and infrastructure projects, could further challenge India's strategic interests in the region.

Non-Traditional Security Challenges

Beyond traditional security threats, India faces a range of non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific that require a comprehensive and collaborative approach. These challenges, including terrorism, transnational crime, and the effects of climate change, transcend national borders and require cooperative solutions. Addressing these non-traditional security threats is essential for fostering a stable and secure environment conducive to economic growth and development in the region.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)

The Indo-Pacific region remains a fertile ground for violent extremist organizations (VEO) that exploit social and economic vulnerabilities to recruit and operate.¹³ These extremist networks exploit the region's complex geopolitical landscape, porous borders, and diverse societies to spread their extremist ideology and conduct attacks. India has been a target of these groups, notably the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In response, India has enhanced its counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence gathering, border security, and specialized counterterrorism forces. Furthermore, India actively collaborates with partners like the United States and Israel to disrupt terrorist networks and their

financing. This includes intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and cooperation on counterterrorism technology.¹⁴

Transnational Crime

The Indo-Pacific is also plagued by transnational criminal activities that threaten regional security and stability.

- *MARITIME PIRACY*: While once concentrated in the Horn of Africa, piracy has spread to Southeast Asia, disrupting trade and endangering lives. These acts of piracy frequently involve armed assaults on vessels, disrupt global trade, hinder investment, and foster an atmosphere of insecurity.¹⁵ Indian ships and fishermen have been frequent victims of these attacks, suffering significant losses and endangering lives. These attacks not only pose a threat to India's economic interests but also highlight the vulnerability of its citizens working in the maritime domain. In response, India has intensified its naval presence, collaborating with international partners to counter piracy. By escorting vessels, conducting joint patrols, and sharing intelligence, the Indian Navy has played a crucial role in safeguarding maritime trade and protecting the nation's economic interests.¹⁶
- *DRUG TRAFFICKING*: The Indo-Pacific region is a key transit route for the global drug trade, with Afghanistan and Myanmar being major sources of narcotics. These illicit substances fuel addiction, crime, and violence in India and beyond.¹⁷ Drug trafficking also provides a financial lifeline for VEOs and insurgent groups, enabling them to acquire weapons and carry out attacks.¹⁸ To counter this threat, India has strengthened its anti-drug efforts through increased surveillance, regional cooperation, and international partnerships. For instance, in 2024, India made its largest-ever offshore narcotics seizure, intercepting a fishing boat

coming from an Iranian port with 3,300 kilograms of drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine.¹⁹ This demonstrates India's growing capabilities in maritime interdiction.

- *HUMAN TRAFFICKING*: The region is also a hub for human trafficking, with vulnerable individuals being exploited for forced labor and sexual exploitation. This illicit trade preys on the region's economic disparities and porous borders. Countries like Thailand, India, Nepal, Cambodia, and Myanmar serve as both source and destination countries for victims. Women and girls are often trafficked for domestic servitude, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation, while men and boys are frequently subjected to forced labor in industries such as fishing, construction, and agriculture.²⁰

These transnational crimes—piracy, drug trafficking, and human trafficking—form a dangerous nexus that threatens the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. These illicit activities erode the rule of law, providing a lucrative funding source for violent extremist organizations. The profits generated from these crimes are used to fuel terrorism, purchase weapons, and bribe officials, creating a vicious cycle of insecurity and instability in the region.

To effectively counter these interconnected challenges, India recognizes the importance of collaborative action. By partnering with other nations in the region and beyond, India seeks to enhance information sharing, coordinate law enforcement efforts, and build capacity to address these transnational threats. This cooperative approach is central to India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the misuse of anti-terror laws by India and some regional governments to suppress dissent and persecute minorities undermine these efforts. Such actions risk fueling grievances that extremist groups like the Islamic State exploit to strengthen their foothold.²¹

India's Cooperation Partnerships

To advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has actively pursued cooperative partnerships with a range of countries in the region and beyond. These partnerships span various domains, including security, economics, and climate action, and are crucial for addressing shared challenges and promoting regional stability.

Key Bilateral Partnerships

India has cultivated strong bilateral partnerships with key countries in the Indo-Pacific to advance its strategic objectives and promote regional stability. These partnerships are characterized by a growing convergence of interests, shared democratic values, and a commitment to a rules-based order.

India-U.S. Relationship

The India-U.S. relationship has undergone a remarkable transformation over recent decades. Once characterized by Cold War-era skepticism, it has evolved into a robust strategic partnership rooted in converging interests. Since the late 1990s, every U.S. president—from Bill Clinton onward—has further strengthened ties, leaving the relationship sturdier than before. This deepening partnership reflects a growing recognition of its significance for regional and global stability, as both nations increasingly view each other as vital to addressing contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Key initiatives and mechanisms contributing to this partnership include:

- *2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE*: Established in 2017, this high-level dialogue brings together the foreign and defense ministers of both countries to discuss strategic and security issues. It has institutionalized strategic cooperation and elevated the bilateral relationship.²²

- *INITIATIVE ON CRITICAL AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY (iCET)*: Launched in 2023, iCET focuses on collaboration in cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, semiconductors, and biotechnology. This initiative reflects the growing convergence in technological innovation and its importance for economic growth and national security.²³
- *INDIA-U.S. DEFENSE ACCELERATION ECOSYSTEM (INDUS-X)*: This initiative aims to catalyze defense innovation and industrial cooperation, serving as a platform to connect defense companies, promote co-production opportunities, and foster technological collaboration.²⁴

These initiatives highlight the growing depth and breadth of the India-U.S. partnership, with both countries working together on critical and sensitive issues, reflecting a shared commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

India-Japan Relationship

Driven by converging strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, this relationship is a comprehensive strategic partnership, extending beyond its economic foundations.

This deepening partnership is reflected in collaborative initiatives such as:

- *ECONOMIC COOPERATION*: The foundation of the relationship remains strong, with the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement (CEPA) facilitating increased trade and investment.²⁵ Both countries are also actively collaborating on initiatives related to digital technology, clean energy, and semiconductors.
- *2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE*: Established in 2019, the dialogue between the foreign and defense ministers of both countries was initiated to further deepen bilateral security

and defense cooperation and the special strategic and global partnership between them.²⁶ India has the “2+2” Ministerial format with very few countries, including the United States, Australia, and Russia.

- *DEFENSE AND SECURITY COOPERATION*: The India-Japan partnership increasingly encompasses defense and security cooperation. The Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) facilitates logistical support and interoperability between their armed forces. Both countries also participate in joint military exercises, such as the Malabar naval exercise, and engage in dialogues on maritime security.²⁷
- *SHARED STRATEGIC VISION*: India and Japan share a common vision for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region underpinned by a commitment to a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law. Both countries are active participants in the Quad.

The India-Japan partnership is a cornerstone of India’s Act East policy and its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, reflecting a growing convergence of interests and a shared commitment to keeping the Indo-Pacific region secure.

India-Philippines Relationship

India’s partnership with the Philippines is witnessing an upswing, driven by shared concerns about China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. This burgeoning partnership encompasses several key dimensions:

- *DEFENSE COOPERATION*: The strengthening of defense ties is a notable development. In 2022, India signed a contract to supply BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines, marking India’s first major defense export to Southeast Asia.²⁸

- *STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE*: India and the Philippines share a common interest in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Both Countries are vocal in their support for freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.
- *ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TIES*: While defense and strategic cooperation have taken center stage, India and the Philippines are also working to enhance economic and cultural ties.

The growing partnership between India and the Philippines is a significant development in the Indo-Pacific, which holds the potential to further counterbalance China's growing influence.

India-Vietnam Relationship

In recent years, the India-Vietnam partnership has evolved into a robust and multifaceted relationship encompassing defense, political, and economic collaboration. Their shared commitment to a rules-based Indo-Pacific is shaped by mutual concerns over China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, where Vietnam faces territorial disputes, and India has vested economic interests, particularly with its oil exploration projects.²⁹

- *DEFENSE COOPERATION*: The India-Vietnam defense relationship is a cornerstone of their partnership, characterized by military training, equipment transfers, and credit lines provided by India. Joint naval exercises further enhance maritime security and promote regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. In a landmark move in 2023, India gifted an operational Indian Navy missile corvette to Vietnam—the first instance of India transferring an active warship to a friendly nation—underscoring the strategic depth of their ties.³⁰
- *ALIGNED INTERESTS*: Elevated to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2016, India and Vietnam share this

designation with only a select group of nations. As of 2024, the group includes South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Australia—three of which are Quad members.³¹ Both nations are among the world’s fastest growing economies, attracting investment from other countries seeking alternatives to China.³²

- *ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TIES*: Bilateral trade reached \$15 billion in 2023, with India ranking as Vietnam’s seventh-largest trading partner and a key importer of Vietnamese products.³³ In 2024, the two countries signed nine agreements to strengthen cooperation in areas such as culture, tourism, broadcasting, and agriculture, further enriching their economic and cultural relationship.³⁴

Regional and Multilateral Initiatives

Beyond bilateral partnerships, India actively engages in regional and multilateral initiatives to promote its Indo-Pacific vision and address shared challenges. These initiatives encompass a wide range of areas, including security, climate action, maritime cooperation, and economic integration.

Net Security Provider

India aspires to be a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific, contributing to regional peace and stability. This involves:

- *MARITIME SECURITY*: Ensuring the security of sea lanes, conducting anti-piracy operations, and participating in joint naval exercises with regional partners.
- *HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF (HADR)*: Providing HADR to neighboring countries and contributing to regional disaster response mechanisms.

- *CAPACITY BUILDING*: Engaging in capacity-building initiatives with partner nations to enhance their security capabilities.

India's "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship) initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified its effort toward global leadership. By providing vaccine doses to countries in the Indo-Pacific, India signaled its ability to contribute to regional health security.³⁵

Climate Action and Disaster Resilience

Recognizing the growing threat of climate change, India has prioritized climate action and disaster resilience in its regional policies. Key initiatives include:

- *COALITION FOR DISASTER RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE (CDRI)*: This global initiative, launched by India in 2019, brings together governments, organizations, and the private sector to promote climate-resilient infrastructure.³⁶
- *ASEAN-INDIA GREEN FUND (AIGF)*: This collaborative initiative established in 2007 supports projects focused on climate change adaptation and mitigation, renewable energy, and environmental conservation.³⁷

These initiatives reflect India's adherence to building regional resilience to climate change and natural disasters, recognizing their potential to destabilize the region and hinder development.

Maritime Security

As a major maritime power with a long coastline and a growing navy, India plays a crucial role in maintaining maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Key aspects of India's maritime security efforts include:

- *MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS*: Enhancing maritime domain awareness through surveillance, patrolling, and information sharing.
- *REGIONAL COOPERATION*: Deepening cooperation with regional partners through joint naval exercises, information sharing, and capacity-building initiatives.
- *INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS CENTRE (IMAC)*: Strengthening India's maritime domain awareness and contributing to regional initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).³⁸

These efforts are crucial for safeguarding India's maritime interests, protecting sea lines of communication, and promoting a stable and secure maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Integration

India is increasingly engaging in regional trade agreements and economic initiatives to boost its economic growth and influence in the Indo-Pacific. Key examples include:

- *INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK (IPEF)*: India is an active participant in IPEF, which aims to deepen economic ties among Indo-Pacific nations with a focus on areas such as supply chain resilience, clean energy, and digital trade.³⁹
- *FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS (FTA)*: India has signed several FTAs with regional partners, including ASEAN, South Korea, Japan, and Mauritius to promote trade and investment.

Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

While India's strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific is ambitious and multifaceted, its efforts face various internal and external challenges that could hinder its ability to achieve its objectives.

1. *DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS*: India's domestic economic challenges, such as slow growth, fiscal deficits, or high unemployment, will limit its capacity to invest in strategic initiatives abroad. These economic constraints can affect:

- *Defense Modernization*: Limited resources can hinder India's ability to modernize its armed forces and acquire advanced military technology. For example, an examination of the defense budget for FY 2024-2025 accounts for only 12.9% of the total budget, falling short of adequately addressing the scale of threats the country faces. This allocation is actually lower than the previous fiscal year's, highlighting the challenges India faces in funding necessary military modernization.⁴⁰
- *Diplomatic Initiatives*: Financial constraints will also limit India's ability to engage in robust diplomacy, including funding embassies, providing development assistance, and participating in international forums.
- *Infrastructure Development*: India's own infrastructure gaps, including inadequate transportation networks and energy infrastructure, will hinder its ability to participate in regional connectivity initiatives and promote trade.

Furthermore, national political considerations and concerns about protecting domestic industries have influenced India's cautious approach to regional trade agreements. This is evidenced in:

- *Withdrawal from RCEP*: India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019. RCEP is a free-trade agreement among 15 Asia-Pacific nations, including China, Japan, and Australia. India's concerns centered on the potential negative impact on domestic industries and the economy.⁴¹

- *Limited Interest in CTPP*: India has shown limited interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a free trade agreement among 11 Pacific Rim countries, including Japan, Canada, and Australia. India's concerns stem from the potential impact on domestic industries and the agreement's stringent standards, which could be challenging for India to meet given its current regulatory and economic environment.⁴²

These examples highlight the tension between India's strategic interests in regional economic integration and its domestic concerns about protecting its industries and ensuring equitable economic growth.

Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

India's commitment to "strategic autonomy" is a defining feature of its foreign policy. It allows India to maintain flexibility and independence in its international relations, avoiding entanglement in rigid alliances and pursuing its own national interests. This approach has historically allowed India to maintain balanced relations with various powers, even those with conflicting interests. For example, India has managed to sustain ties with both the United States and Russia, even amidst growing tensions between them. This is evident in India's continued purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia despite the threat of U.S. sanctions and its simultaneous participation in the Quad.

However, this approach can also present challenges in the Indo-Pacific:

- *PERCEPTION OF AMBIGUITY*: India's reluctance to explicitly criticize actions by countries like Russia and Iran or to take firm stances on certain global conflicts creates a perception of ambiguity about its commitment to a rules-based order. This can potentially erode its credibility on the world stage.

and diminish its influence in shaping the regional and global security architecture.⁴³

- *MISSED OPPORTUNITIES*: This cautious approach could lead to missed opportunities for India to exert greater leadership in the Indo-Pacific and contribute more actively to shaping a stable and rules-based regional order.

While strategic autonomy offers India valuable flexibility, it requires careful calibration on key global issues. India will need to balance its commitment to independence with a demonstrated dedication to upholding international norms and countering actions that threaten the rules-based order. This balance is particularly crucial in the Indo-Pacific, where India aspires to lead in fostering regional stability.

However, India's increasing reluctance to fully support the existing global order raises questions about its stance. By maintaining "strategic silence" on contentious global issues, India risks long-term reputational damage, as its neutrality may be perceived as tacit approval of anti-democratic and revisionist actions. For example, India's decision not to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn criticism from global partners, who see this stance as contradictory to India's historical support for sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁴

A case could be made that India's abstention reflects a view of the Ukraine conflict as a distant European issue, outside South Asian interests. Yet, India's restraint extends beyond Europe. In 2022, India abstained from a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) vote to establish a fact-finding mission on human rights abuses in Iran after the protests over Mahsa Amini's death.⁴⁵ This decision appeared to prioritize relations with authoritarian regimes over accountability and reform.

Similarly, India abstained from a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) vote calling for an immediate end to violence in

Myanmar and the release of political prisoners, opting instead for “quiet and patient diplomacy.”⁴⁶ This stance aligned India with Russia and China, powers often seen as challenging the rules-based order, and signaled tacit tolerance of Myanmar’s military junta. By refraining from supporting democratic governance and human rights, India missed an opportunity to demonstrate principled leadership.

This pattern of neutrality raises legitimate concerns about India’s commitment to democratic values on the global stage. While restraint may safeguard short-term interests, it risks eroding India’s credibility and influence as a democratic advocate. To achieve influential global leadership, India will need to recalibrate its approach, balancing autonomy with principled positions on key issues. Aligning its actions more closely with its professed democratic ideals would not only reinforce its commitment to a rules-based order but also enhance its reputation as a responsible and engaged global actor.

Regional Volatility

India’s efforts to foster regional cohesion under the Neighborhood First policy remain fraught with volatility. Relations with Pakistan continue to be strained by longstanding territorial disputes and security concerns, stalling meaningful cooperation. Diplomatic challenges with neighbors like Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka persist, often driven by border disagreements and political differences. Compounding these issues is China’s expanding influence in South Asia, particularly through its BRI, which poses a significant challenge to India’s efforts to counterbalance Beijing’s economic and strategic footprint in the region.

The volatile geopolitical landscape in India’s neighborhood—highlighted by the ousting of Sheikh Hasina’s government in Bangladesh, the military coup in Myanmar, Pakistan’s precarious balance, Taliban control in Afghanistan, and fractious ties with Sri

Lanka and the Maldives⁴⁷—poses another set of challenges, which have spillover effects on India's security and economic interests.⁴⁸ This necessitates that India be less irascible when neighbors complain at its heavy-handedness and devote significant resources and diplomatic efforts in its Neighborhood First Policy to manage these relationships, potentially diverting attention and resources from its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

India's Aspiration for Leadership in the Global South

India's increasingly assertive role in international affairs, particularly its challenge to the traditional Western-dominated rule-making processes, is a significant factor to consider when assessing its commitment to a rules-based international order. India first announced its support for such an order at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, and the term has since become a staple in India's official statements.⁴⁹ However, India has concurrently criticized the non-representative nature of international bodies like the United Nations (UN), calling them “not representative of current realities.” At a 2024 UN summit, the Indian Intelligence Bureau Director underscored this view by highlighting Africa's limited representation on the UN Security Council, despite Africa being the focal point of over half the Council's work.⁵⁰ This stance reflects India's advocacy for a more inclusive global governance structure.

India is leveraging its growing influence to bridge the gap between the Global South and Global North, advocating for climate justice, equitable economic development, and technology access. Its active participation in multilateral forums like the United Nations, G20, and BRICS demonstrates its commitment to advancing the interests of developing countries. India played a prominent role in inducting the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023,⁵¹ solidifying its position as a champion for greater inclusion of the Global South in international governance. Furthermore, with the expansion of BRICS to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates India hopes to strengthen its goal

for leadership within the Global South and its ability to shape the agenda on key global issues.

The BRICS Expansion: Implications for India

India plays a unique role within BRICS. As the most Western-oriented member, it aims to bridge the gap between the West and the Global South. Simultaneously, India is arguably the primary beneficiary of BRICS' expansion, leveraging the platform to amplify its global influence. This unique position allows India to balance ties with the West while using BRICS to foster economic partnership and champion a non-Western yet non-confrontational approach.⁵² Indian leaders have framed BRICS as an entity that operates outside Western-centric frameworks, a stance that has resonated across the bloc. Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed India's sentiment that BRICS is "not anti-Western; it's just non-Western." This shared perspective was reaffirmed at the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, presenting BRICS as a pluralistic rather than adversarial coalition.⁵³

At the same summit, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argued for India's role as leader of the Global South, stating, "The Global South has a high degree of trust and expectation from India." India has actively embraced this leadership role, with neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and Bhutan acknowledging India as a "big brother" and "benevolent elder sibling."⁵⁴ However, India's regional ambitions also face criticism. While it seeks to lead, India must overcome significant internal constraints—such as poverty, unemployment, infrastructural gaps and religious divisions—while also contending with the growing regional influence of China.

India and China: The Regional Face-Off

A notable moment in India-China relations occurred at the 2024 Kazan BRICS summit, where Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Modi held sideline talks addressing the protracted border tensions.⁵⁵ This dialogue marked a tentative step toward reconciliation after the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in casualties and eroded confidence-building measures that had historically helped prevent conflict escalation.

India and China hold contrasting visions for Asian governance. While China's BRI promotes a China-centric order, India advocates for a multipolar region with shared power among states. This divergence fuels India's concerns about China's motives, particularly as Beijing consolidates influence over smaller neighboring countries. India's ambition on establishing itself as a leader of the Global South serves to counterbalance China's regional influence while avoiding direct military confrontations. However, economic interdependencies complicate this relationship: in 2024, China accounted for 5.8% of India's exports and 14.8% of its imports, making it India's largest trading partner in FY 2024.⁵⁶ These ties, necessitate caution, as any economic estrangement could carry significant costs for India.

In response, India has actively diversified its diplomatic and economic partnerships. This includes engaging in multilateral platforms like the Quad, which provides additional options for balancing China's influence. By fostering these multilateral relationships, India aims to be better positioned to reduce its economic reliance on China and mitigate regional insecurities. This strategy, that could pay huge dividends for all sides, is yet to attract increased foreign investment to India or position it as a competitor to China in infrastructure and technology across the region. Reflecting a pragmatic approach to global governance, India aims to shape a more inclusive and balanced world order while deftly

managing regional complexities. However, the Indo-Pacific remains a dynamic and evolving landscape, requiring India to continuously adapt its strategies to meet emerging challenges and opportunities.

The Future of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's rise as a major power in the Indo-Pacific is reshaping regional dynamics. Its multifaceted approach—anchored in strategic partnerships, regional initiatives, and a commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—has significant potential to bolster regional stability and prosperity. However, India faces notable challenges, including domestic constraints, the complexities of balancing strategic autonomy, and regional volatility. Addressing these challenges effectively will allow India to solidify its role as a leading power and actively shape a rules-based, inclusive regional order.

Strong regional and global partnerships will be critical to India's success. A failure to assert its stance on key issues risks undermining its role in stabilizing the region and diminishing its ability to counter China's growing influence. Reaffirming its commitment to a rules-based international order will be imperative for India to maintain its stature and influence in both regional and global affairs.

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is still evolving. As the regional and global landscape continues to shift, India will need to adapt its strategy to address new challenges and capitalize on new opportunities. Several key factors will determine the future trajectory of India's Indo-Pacific approach:

1. *THE EVOLVING REGIONAL ORDER*: The Indo-Pacific is witnessing a dynamic interplay of forces, with the rise of China, the U.S.-China competition, and regional instability creating a complex security environment. India will need to deftly navigate these shifting dynamics to secure its interests and promote regional stability. This will require a nuanced

approach that balances its strategic autonomy with the need to forge strong partnerships with like-minded countries.

2. *THE ROLE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES*: Emerging technologies, such as AI, cyber capabilities, and space technologies, will play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. India will need to invest in these technologies and develop its own capabilities to ensure its security and maintain its strategic edge. It will also need to actively engage in shaping norms and regulations for the responsible use of these technologies in the region.
3. *INDIA'S GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS*: India's growing economic and military power is accompanied by rising global aspirations. India seeks to play a more prominent role in global governance institutions and contribute to shaping international norms and rules. This will require India to actively engage in multilateral forums, strengthen its diplomatic capabilities, and demonstrate its commitment to a rules-based international order.
4. *ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT*: India's ability to sustain its Indo-Pacific strategy will depend on its success in addressing domestic challenges, such as promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, advancing social cohesion, and improving infrastructure. These domestic factors will shape its capacity to invest in defense modernization, diplomatic initiatives, and regional connectivity projects.
5. *ENHANCING SECURITY COOPERATION*: Deepening security cooperation with partners will be crucial for navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific. India can prioritize the following areas:

- *Maritime Security*: Establish a joint maritime domain awareness center, conduct complex combined naval exercises, and facilitate technology transfer for maritime security.
- *Counterterrorism*: Enhance intelligence sharing, expand capacity-building programs, and conduct joint counterterrorism exercises.
- *Cybersecurity*: Establish a cybersecurity information-sharing partnership, conduct joint cyber exercises, and develop a regional cyber code of conduct.
- *Climate Change and Disaster Resilience*: Develop a regional disaster response mechanism, collaborate on early warning systems, and provide climate change capacity building.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is a work in progress. Its success will depend on its ability to adapt to the evolving regional and global landscape, leverage emerging technologies, and address domestic challenges. By effectively navigating these complexities and deepening security cooperation with its partners, India can advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and play a leading role in shaping a stable and prosperous regional order.

Conclusion: Navigating Multilateral Groupings, Polycrisis, and Diplomatic Realignments in the Indo-Pacific

India's emergence as a major power is perceptibly impacting the Indo-Pacific. Its approach to the region is defined by a multifaceted strategy that combines active multilateral engagement, a commitment to rules-based order, and a proactive response to global challenges. This was exemplified by India's 2023 G20 presidency, where it spearheaded initiatives on climate change, digital transformation, and sustainable development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of nations under the theme "One Earth, One

Family, One Future.”⁵⁷ India’s leadership in the G20 demonstrates its stated fidelity to cooperative multilateralism and its determination to address shared challenges while solidifying its position as a responsible global actor.

The current era of “polycrisis”—marked by the convergence of pandemics, geopolitical tensions, and environmental emergencies—presents both challenges and opportunities for India. In response to these intersecting crises, India has adopted a proactive and resilient approach, demonstrating leadership in global health security and climate action. The “Vaccine Maitri” program, which provided COVID-19 vaccine support to over 90 countries, was meant to demonstrate India’s commitment to global health cooperation.⁵⁸ Similarly, India’s co-founding of the International Solar Alliance signals its dedication to sustainable solutions for developing countries.⁵⁹ These initiatives reinforce India’s role as a stabilizing force that contributes to collaborative solutions in a complex and unpredictable world.

India’s diplomatic approach is characterized by strategic autonomy, allowing it to engage with a diverse range of global actors while preserving its independence. This approach, which emphasizes “involvement with restraint,” is evident in India’s tightrope balancing of relations with major powers like the United States, Russia, and China. While India participates in the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, it also maintains longstanding ties with Russia in areas of defense and energy. This reflects India’s commitment to deepening partnerships that serve its national interests without compromising its strategic autonomy. The growing India-U.S. strategic partnership, for example, has benefited from American flexibility regarding India’s purchases of Iranian oil and Russian military equipment, including the S-400 missile system.⁶⁰ This understanding of India’s unique geopolitical context reinforces U.S. support for a stronger and more autonomous India.

Furthermore India's emergence as a major defense exporter, with the United States, France, and Armenia as top customers, highlights its growing role in the global security industry.⁶¹

India's ambitions to become a global power are significantly challenged by domestic issues, particularly a lack of social cohesion.⁶² Despite its economic growth and geopolitical advancements, internal divisions rooted in religion,⁶³ caste, regionalism, and economic inequality continue to pose substantial risks.⁶⁴ These factors will undermine India's ability to project unity and stability, which are essential for achieving and sustaining a prominent global role.⁶⁵

Externally, shifting geopolitical dynamics—such as the war in Ukraine and escalating tensions among major powers—compel India to constantly reassess its partnerships and alliances. While the United States has supported India's rise, historical tensions and lingering skepticism within India about U.S. intentions persist. Memories of past U.S. sanctions and military support to Pakistan contribute to this cautiousness.⁶⁶ Compounding these challenges are concerns about India's democratic backsliding, which may strain ties with Western democracies.⁶⁷ Conversely, Russia's consistent support—exemplified by its avoidance of sanctions against India—has cultivated a perception of reliability among segments of Indian society, adding complexity to India's balancing act on the global stage.

As India's global role expands, it will need to adapt its diplomatic strategies to navigate an increasingly complex and multipolar world. This requires continued investment in institutional capacity and the cultivation of strategic partnerships that enable India to exercise its influence responsibly and effectively. India is actively working to shape a multipolar order that prioritizes sovereignty, adherence to international law, and regional cooperation. Its approach, defined by "involvement with restraint," allows India to preserve its strategic autonomy.

However, aspiring global leaders must also take principled stances on democracy and human rights. Beyond economic and military strength, lasting credibility and influence are built on foundations of core values, even when doing so entails diplomatic costs. For India, balancing strategic restraint with active engagement will be crucial to building its soft power and global reputation.

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects its commitment to regional stability and its aspirations to be a leading force in shaping the regional order. By balancing its strategic autonomy with active participation in multilateral initiatives, India is navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific while upholding its longstanding principles. This is exemplified by its engagement in the Quad, where it collaborates with like-minded nations to promote a free, open, and rules-based regional order. Through a combination of multilateral groupings and strategic partnerships, India seeks to further establish its credentials and consolidate its stature as a regional power and a reliable partner in navigating the complexities of this increasingly vital region.

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