

CHAPTER 8



INDIA'S STRATEGIC ASCENT

Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath

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

— Lee Kuan Yew, first Prime Minister
and founder of Singapore²

Introduction

“It is inevitable,” said India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 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.”³

More than seven decades later, India’s strategic ascent reflects both those enduring conditions and deliberate choices. Its rise is shaped by geography at the crossroads of critical sea lanes, by the scale of its population and market, and by its expanding military and diplomatic presence across the Indo-Pacific. But India’s growing stature is not simply the product of structural advantage—it is also the result of calibrated strategic behavior in a contested regional order.

India has transitioned from its Cold War-era posture of non-alignment to a 21st-century doctrine of strategic autonomy,⁴ which enables engagement with competing major powers without alignment to any single bloc. It maintains robust defense and technology ties with the United States, energy and arms dependencies with Russia, and significant commercial interdependence with China—even amid unresolved border tensions.

This chapter examines India’s Indo-Pacific strategy as a case study in strategic autonomy under competitive multipolarity. It traces India’s evolving approach to regional engagement, assesses the geopolitical constraints and opportunities it faces, and evaluates how New Delhi balances sovereignty, deterrence, and leadership in a fluid strategic environment. By analyzing India’s partnerships, defense posture, and regional initiatives, the chapter explores how India seeks to position itself—not as a subordinate in a bloc—

but as a stabilizing power shaping the rules of engagement in a region increasingly defined by competition and complexity.

India's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region

India's Indo-Pacific strategy has emerged as a central pillar of its foreign policy, anchored in safeguarding national interests, expanding regional influence, and responding to a shifting balance of power. With its geographic positioning astride key sea lanes, its economic ambitions, and its defense imperatives, India views the Indo-Pacific not just as a theater of opportunity but as a crucible of completion.

Strategic autonomy underpins India's approach. Rather than aligning with any major power, New Delhi has adopted a multi-vector strategy that blends bilateral engagements, minilateral platforms, and selective multilateralism. Its Indo-Pacific posture is defined by five core thrusts:

- **Neighborhood First**

Launched in 2014, this policy prioritizes engagement with South Asian neighbors through trade, infrastructure, and joint security initiatives. While cooperation with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka has deepened, tensions with Pakistan—primarily over terrorism and Kashmir—continue to impede broader regional integration through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In response, India has pivoted toward sub-regional frameworks such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework, where progress is more feasible.

- **Act East**

Originating in 1991, India's Act East policy has expanded from economic outreach to a strategic partnership with Southeast Asia. India engages in regional forums like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, pursues infrastructure linkages such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and conducts joint military exercises with Vietnam, Singapore, and others—enhancing its presence in a region where China's influence is increasingly assertive.⁵

- **The Quad**

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia reflects a convergence around a rules-based maritime order. The Quad facilitates cooperation on issues ranging from maritime domain awareness to emerging technologies, while maintaining a flexible, non-bloc character that aligns with India's strategic autonomy.

- **Maritime Security and Connectivity**

India has prioritized maritime security as a core element of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Initiatives such as the Sagarmala project aim to modernize domestic port infrastructure.

- **Net Security Provider Role**

India has expanded its role as a regional security contributor—through humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and defense capacity-building.⁶ Operations such as its 2004 tsunami relief mission⁷ and its ongoing military exercises with Southeast Asian partners underscore its aspirations to provide public goods without prescriptive alignment.

India's approach reflects a careful balancing act: expanding influence while preserving autonomy, partnering without becoming beholden, and navigating a region increasingly shaped by asymmetries of power. In this environment, India's ability to lead will depend not just on intent but on sustained capability, credibility, and strategic clarity.

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Landscape

The Indo-Pacific has become the epicenter of a geopolitical contestation. This vast region is defined by intersecting ambitions, contested norms, and shifting power alignments. India's geostrategic location—stretching from the western Indian Ocean to the eastern maritime chokepoints—confers both opportunity and exposure. It stands at the fulcrum of regional connectivity and competition.

- **United States**

Washington's approach centers on preserving its predominant position in the region through a "free and open Indo-Pacific." This involves strengthening

alliances with countries like Japan and Australia through initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS, while expanding defense and economic partnerships with India and key Southeast Asian nations. U.S. activities include enhanced military exercises, increased forward presence, and freedom of navigation operations to contest excessive maritime claims. Economically, Washington seeks to counterbalance China's influence through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), promoting standards-based regional integration.

- **China**

China continues to expand its influence via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), using infrastructure investment to deepen political and economic linkages across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Concurrently, it is rapidly modernizing its military and asserting maritime claims in the South China Sea, constructing artificial islands and deploying military assets in disputed areas. These moves have intensified tensions with regional neighbors and raised questions about Beijing's long-term strategic intentions and willingness to use coercion.

- **Other Regional Actors**

Japan and Australia play increasingly proactive roles, both as U.S. allies and as autonomous security actors. Japan is ramping up defense spending and acquiring long-range strike capabilities, while Australia's

acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS marks a significant shift in regional posture. Southeast Asian nations, meanwhile, pursue strategic hedging—resisting alignment pressures by engaging both the United States and China while prioritizing economic development and regional stability.

In this competitive landscape, India pursues a strategy of multi-alignment anchored in strategic autonomy. It leverages convergence with the United States and other Quad partners to advance security cooperation, while engaging Southeast Asia through its Act East policy. At the same time, India maintains calibrated engagement with China, even as border tensions persist. India is also expanding defense ties with France and Russia and investing in indigenous military modernization—steps aimed at enhancing operational resilience and preserving sovereign agency in a fluid Indo-Pacific order.

Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is anchored in cooperative engagement but shaped by a complex and contested security environment. To preserve its strategic autonomy and regional influence, India must navigate a spectrum of threats, including territorial disputes, terrorism, cyber intrusions, and instability in neighboring states. These challenges demand a balanced approach that integrates defense modernization, proactive diplomacy, and economic resilience.

Traditional Security Challenges

India faces persistent conventional threats, notably territorial disputes and military standoffs. The China-India border remains a flashpoint, with clashes in the Galwan Valley and Tawang sector underscoring the fragility of the Line of Actual Control.⁸ In the maritime domain, the broader Indo-Pacific is marked by competing claims and power projection, requiring India to sustain a capable joint force and deepen security cooperation with trusted partners.

China's Expanding Pressure

China's assertive behavior presents the most comprehensive challenge. Its territorial claims in the South China Sea, rapid military modernization, and dual-use infrastructure projects signal an intent to reshape the regional order. Technologically, China's advances in artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and telecommunications (e.g., 5G/6G) carry long-term strategic implications. In the Himalayan theater, continued friction over the border reflects the broader strategic distrust between Asia's two rising powers.

The China-Pakistan Nexus

Pakistan remains a persistent source of instability, a challenge now amplified by its deepening strategic alignment with China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), anchored at Gwadar Port, extends China's reach into the Arabian Sea and strengthens Pakistan's ability to contest

India's maritime posture.⁹ Chinese support for Pakistan's naval modernization, including submarines and advanced surface vessels, raises the prospect of enhanced joint operations in the Indian Ocean, directly challenging India's primacy in its near seas.¹⁰

The possibility of coordinated China-Pakistan action, whether explicit or tacit, complicates India's deterrence calculations and demands sustained vigilance.¹¹ The April 2025 terror attack in Indian-administered Kashmir—followed by a sharp military exchange across the Line of Control—brought these risks into sharp relief. Pakistan's use of Chinese-origin J-10C fighter jets, reportedly downing two Indian aircraft, revealed not only the operational depth of the China-Pakistan defense cooperation but also Beijing's growing role in South Asian conflict dynamics. Although China sought to distance itself diplomatically, its defense transfers and growing interoperability with Pakistan underscored the challenge India faces in managing escalation under the conditions of indirect Chinese involvement.

In response, India is recalibrating its defense strategy by deepening engagement with key Indo-Pacific partners—enhancing interoperability, diversifying defense supply chains, and building credible security partnerships that reinforce deterrence without compromising strategic autonomy. This approach allows India to remain flexible while positioning itself as a reliable regional security provider capable of responding to multidimensional threats.

The Afghan Variable

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has rekindled concerns over terrorism and regional instability. India views the resurgence of groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) as a direct threat, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. The risk of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for anti-India actors remains acute. Moreover, Taliban rule may facilitate ideological spillover that could destabilize India's internal security environment.

Instability in Afghanistan also carries downstream effects for India's maritime security. The Arabian Sea-Indian Ocean corridor is vital for energy imports and trade. Any disruptions, whether due to terrorism, piracy, or Chinese strategic inroads via infrastructure investments, could adversely impact India's economic security. Thus, India must account for the intersection of continental and maritime threats as it shapes its Indo-Pacific security posture.

Non-Traditional Security Challenges

India's Indo-Pacific security calculus increasingly extends beyond traditional military threats to encompass a range of non-traditional security challenges. Issues such as terrorism, transnational crime, and maritime insecurity transcend borders and demand integrated, multilateral responses. Addressing these challenges is essential to sustaining the region's stability, prosperity, and rule-based order.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO)

The Indo-Pacific remains vulnerable to violent extremist organizations that exploit regional fault lines,¹² economic disparity, and porous borders. Groups such as LeT and JeM have long targeted India, with the 2008 Mumbai attacks underscoring the reach and lethality of such networks. In response, India has expanded counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence fusion, specialized force readiness, and cross-border interdiction. Bilateral and trilateral cooperation with partners like the United States and Israel enhance India's ability to track, disrupt, and dismantle extremist networks through joint training, technology transfers, and information sharing.¹³

Transnational Criminal Networks

The Indo-Pacific is increasingly affected by illicit networks that operate across land and maritime domains, often intersecting with terrorist financing and regional instability.

- **Maritime Piracy**

Although global hotspots have shifted, Southeast Asia remains a piracy-prone region.¹⁴ Indian vessels and fishermen have been direct targets. India has responded by strengthening its naval presence, conducting coordinated patrols, and enhancing maritime domain awareness in collaboration with regional partners.¹⁵

- **Drug Trafficking**

India sits astride key narcotic trafficking routes, with Afghanistan and Myanmar serving as major supply hubs. The flow of heroin and methamphetamines not only fosters domestic criminality,¹⁶ but also finances armed insurgent and extremist groups.¹⁷ A landmark seizure in 2024, 3,300 kilograms of narcotics from a vessel linked to Iran,¹⁸ demonstrates India's growing interdiction capabilities and operational coordination.

- **Human Trafficking**

Economic disparities and lax enforcement have made South and Southeast Asia major source and destination zones for human trafficking. Victims, often women and children, are trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and servitude across industries and borders.¹⁹ This phenomenon erodes social stability and generates illicit revenue streams that often intersect with other criminal enterprises.

These transnational threats—piracy, drugs, trafficking—form a dangerous nexus that undermines governance, fuels armed actors, and erodes public trust. India's strategy emphasizes regional cooperation to enhance law enforcement, maritime surveillance, and judicial capacity. Joint efforts with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and other multilateral forums are critical in this regard.

Challenges in Democratic Practices

However, counterterrorism and anti-crime strategies risk strategic backfire when perceived as tools for political suppression. The misuse of security laws, whether by India and regional partners, can deepen societal cleavages and inadvertently create openings for extremist recruitment.²⁰ Ensuring that rule-of-law response upholds civil liberties and inclusivity remains a key condition for sustainable security.

India's Cooperation Partnerships

To advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has carefully built a network of strategic partnerships spanning across security, economics, and diplomacy. These relationships are not merely transactional; they reflect a convergence of interests, shared values, and mutual determination to manage regional challenges and reinforce a stable balance of power.

India-U.S. Relationship

The transformation of the India-U.S. relationship is perhaps the clearest expression of India's broader strategic ascent. Once marked by Cold War-era skepticism, ties between New Delhi and Washington have steadily deepened since the late 1990s, with every U.S. administration from President Clinton onward strengthening the relationship. Today, both nations recognize that their partnership is not simply bilateral—it is

central to maintaining regional stability and shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape.

The partnership has taken concrete form through a series of high-impact mechanisms. The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, launched in 2017, has institutionalized high-level foreign and defense coordination, elevating bilateral strategic discussions to a standing framework.²¹ The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), launched in 2023 and renamed in February 2025 as TRUST,²² links both nations in cutting-edge collaboration on artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, and biotechnology, underlining the intersection of technological innovation and national security.²³ Meanwhile, the India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) connects defense industries and accelerates joint development, promoting co-production and advanced technological cooperation.²⁴

Together, these efforts reflect not only the growing depth of India-U.S. ties but also their expanding strategic breadth,²⁵ anchored in shared goals of shaping a resilient, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

India-Japan Relationship

The India-Japan relationship has evolved into one of India's most significant comprehensive strategic partnerships, driven by converging interests across security, economics, and regional governance. While the foundation was initially economic, today the partnership extends well beyond trade and investment, reflecting shared concerns over maritime

security, Chinese assertiveness, and the need to uphold a stable, rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Economically, the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has provided a framework for expanding bilateral trade, investment, and technological cooperation,²⁶ particularly in areas such as clean energy, digital innovation, and semiconductors. This economic interdependence has laid the groundwork for a more expansive strategic alignment.

Security ties have deepened markedly, especially since the establishment of the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in 2019, which brings together foreign and defense ministers from both countries to coordinate strategic and defense priorities²⁷—a format India shares only with a select few partners like the United States and Australia. This institutional dialogue has reinforced practical defense cooperation, exemplified by the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which enhances logistical support and operational interoperability between the two militaries.

Maritime security has emerged as a critical pillar of the partnership. India and Japan now regularly conduct joint military exercises, including the Malabar naval drills, and engage in ongoing maritime dialogues aimed at safeguarding sea lines of communication and countering coercive behaviors in regional waters.²⁸

Above all, the India-Japan relationship is bound by a shared strategic vision: both nations are deeply committed to maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, anchored

in respect for international law and freedom of navigation. As active members of the Quad, India and Japan amplify each other's regional influence, making this partnership a cornerstone of India's Act East policy and broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

India-Philippines Relationship

India's partnership with the Philippines has gained significant momentum in recent years,²⁹ driven by shared concerns over China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and a mutual commitment to upholding a rules-based maritime order. What was once a modest relationship has now expanded into a more consequential strategic alignment.

A landmark moment came in 2022, when India signed a contract to supply BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines—the first major Indian defense export to Southeast Asia.³⁰ This deal signaled not only deepening defense ties but also India's emergence as a credible security partner in the region. Both countries now see greater value in collaborating on maritime security, freedom of navigation, and efforts to resist unilateral changes to the status quo.

While defense cooperation has taken center stage, economic and cultural ties are also steadily expanding, providing a broader foundation for bilateral engagement. This evolving relationship positions India and the Philippines as increasingly aligned middle powers—working together to balance China's regional influence and strengthen the collective resilience of the Indo-Pacific order.

India-Vietnam Relationship

In recent years, the India-Vietnam relationship has matured into one of New Delhi's most strategically important partnerships in Southeast Asia,³¹ marked by robust defense, political, and economic collaboration. Shared concerns over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea—where Vietnam faces direct territorial disputes and India maintains economic stakes through offshore energy projects—have drawn the two nations into closer alignment.³²

At the core of the partnership lies a deepening defense relationship anchored in military training, equipment transfers, credit lines, and regular joint naval exercises. A landmark moment came in 2023 when India gifted an operational Indian Navy missile corvette to Vietnam—the first time India has transferred an active warship to a partner nation, highlighting the strategic depth and trust between the two countries.³³

Elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, Vietnam joins a select group of India's top-tier security and economic partners, alongside South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Australia.³⁴ Both India and Vietnam are among the fastest-growing economies in the region, attracting investment from global actors seeking alternatives to China's economic dominance.³⁵

The bilateral relationship is further enriched by dynamic economic and cultural ties. By 2023, bilateral trade had reached \$15 billion, making India Vietnam's seventh-largest

trading partner.³⁶ In 2024, both governments signed a series of agreements covering cooperation in culture, tourism, broadcasting, and agriculture—broadening the foundation of a relationship that now extends across security, economic, and societal domains.³⁷

Regional and Multilateral Initiatives

Beyond bilateral partnerships, India actively expanded its role in regional and multilateral frameworks to advance its Indo-Pacific vision and address shared challenges. These efforts are central to India's ambition to act not just as a regional power but as a net security provider and stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific.

India's maritime security role has grown substantially, with the Indian Navy increasingly engaged in safeguarding key sea lanes, conducting anti-piracy operations, and participating in multinational naval exercises. India's maritime leadership is further strengthened by its investments in maritime domain awareness infrastructure, notably through the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR),³⁸ which enhances surveillance, information sharing, and coordination across regional partners.

These actions reinforce India's reputation as a reliable partner for regional security, especially in ensuring the safety of commercial shipping and upholding freedom of navigation. India contributes to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—including disaster response operations and post-crisis

support—further highlighting its leadership role, enhancing goodwill, and deepening defense cooperation with affected states.

India's regional influence is also shaped by its leadership on resilience and disaster preparedness. The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), launched by India in 2019, brings together governments, international organizations, and the private sector to promote resilient infrastructure standards worldwide.³⁹ Complementing this, the ASEAN-India Green Fund, established in 2007, supports regional projects focused on adaptation, renewable energy, and environmental conservation.⁴⁰ Together, these initiatives reflect India's recognition that environmental threats and natural disasters can undermine long-term regional stability just as much as traditional security challenges.

India's expanding engagement in economic integration efforts further reinforces its Indo-Pacific strategy. As an active participant in IPEF, India works alongside regional partners to strengthen supply chain resilience, accelerate clean energy transition, and shape the digital trade landscape.⁴¹ Additionally, India's network of free trade agreements with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Mauritius positions it as an increasingly influential economic actor, capable of anchoring regional growth and reducing overdependence on any single economic partner.

Taken together, India's bilateral partnerships, regional engagements, and multilateral initiatives form the backbone of its Indo-Pacific strategy, allowing it to advance national

interests while shaping the regional order. Far from acting in isolation, India is leveraging these relationships to amplify its influence, strengthen its strategic autonomy, and project itself as a stabilizing force in an era of intensifying competition. By combining military modernization, diplomatic agility, economic integration, and soft power, India is not merely responding to the Indo-Pacific's challenges—it is helping define the region's future balance of power.

Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

While India's Indo-Pacific vision is ambitious and multifaceted, its pursuit is constrained by significant domestic and external challenges that threaten to limit its ability to fully realize its strategic objectives.

Domestic Constraints

India's internal economic pressures—ranging from uneven growth and fiscal deficits to persistent unemployment—place clear limits on its capacity to project power abroad. These constraints ripple across several key domains.

First, they directly affect defense modernization.⁴² Despite facing a complex regional security environment, India's FY 2024–2025 defense budget accounts for just 12.9% of the total national budget, a reduction compared to the previous year. This underinvestment limits India's ability to update critical military capabilities, acquire advanced technologies, and sustain long-term force readiness.⁴³

Second, diplomatic engagement is constrained by limited resources. Financial pressures curtail India's ability to expand its diplomatic footprint, sustain development assistance, and fully participate in the growing number of regional and multilateral platforms shaping the Indo-Pacific.

Third, India's own domestic infrastructure gaps, including underdeveloped transport networks, energy systems, and digital connectivity, pose challenges to its participation in regional economic and connectivity initiatives. Without addressing these foundational weaknesses, India's efforts to anchor itself in regional supply chains and trade corridors remain hampered.

These economic and political pressures also shape India's cautious approach to regional trade agreements. Its 2019 withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reflected deep concerns over exposing domestic industries to external competition, particularly from China.⁴⁴ Similarly, India has shown little appetite to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), wary of the agreement's demanding standards and the potential disruption to domestic sectors.⁴⁵

Taken together, these examples highlight a persistent tension within India's Indo-Pacific strategy; while its strategic interests point toward deeper regional integration, domestic political and economic concerns frequently pull in the opposite direction. Reconciling these competing imperatives will be essential if India is to translate its Indo-Pacific ambitions into durable influence and leadership.

Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

India's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy remains a defining feature of its foreign policy, enabling it to maintain flexibility, avoid rigid alliances, and pursue national interests across a complex global landscape. This approach has historically allowed India to sustain balanced relations with major powers—even those in competition or conflict with each other. For example, New Delhi continues to deepen cooperation with the United States through the Quad while simultaneously maintaining strong defense ties with Russia, including its high-profile acquisition of the S-400 missile system despite the threat of U.S. sanctions.

Yet this approach, while providing valuable diplomatic space, also presents significant challenges, especially in the Indo-Pacific context.

Externally, India's cautious posture can create a perception of ambiguity about its commitment to the very rules-based order it claims to champion. Its reluctance to openly criticize the actions of actors like Russia or Iran, or to take firm stances on major global conflicts, risks eroding its credibility among like-minded partners. This ambiguity can diminish India's influence in shaping regional and global security frameworks and limit its ability to position itself as a consistent advocate of international norms.⁴⁶

This caution also leads to missed opportunities. By holding back from decisive leadership on global flashpoints, India has undercut its potential to play a more prominent role in steering

the Indo-Pacific's security architecture. For example, India's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn criticism from partners who see the stance as inconsistent with India's historical support for sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁷ Similarly, India's abstentions at the United Nations on issues like human rights abuses in Iran and military repressions in Myanmar have signaled a reluctance to challenge authoritarian behavior,⁴⁸ even when doing so would align with its democratic identity and bolster its image as a responsible regional leader.⁴⁹

While strategic autonomy affords India considerable diplomatic maneuvering room, it requires careful recalibration to avoid signaling tolerance of anti-democratic or revisionist actions. To sustain its ambitions as an Indo-Pacific leader, India will need to balance independence with principled positions on key global issues. Aligning its actions more closely with its professed democratic values would not only strengthen its credibility but also enhance its ability to shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order as a trusted and influential actor.

Regional Volatility

India's efforts to foster regional cohesion under its Neighborhood First policy continue to face persistent and interlocking challenges. Longstanding tensions with Pakistan—driven by territorial disputes, cross-border militancy, and political distrust—have effectively stalled meaningful bilateral cooperation. At the same time, India's

relationships with other neighbors, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, are frequently strained by border disagreements, domestic political shifts, and perceptions of Indian overreach or heavy-handedness.

Compounding these bilateral frictions is the steady expansion of China's influence in South Asia, particularly through BRI, which has significantly deepened Beijing's economic and strategic footprint across the region. China's engagement with India's neighbors directly complicates New Delhi's ability to sustain its traditional leadership role, adding competitive pressures on both its diplomatic and economic resources.

The broader geopolitical environment has further heightened regional instability.⁵⁰ The military coup in Myanmar, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, Pakistan's internal fragility, the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh, and shifting political alignments in Sri Lanka and the Maldives all create cascading risks with direct implications for India's security and economic interests.⁵¹ To effectively navigate this volatile landscape, India must devote sustained diplomatic energy and resources to stabilizing its periphery, while also tempering its approach to regional disputes and demonstrating greater responsiveness to its neighbors' concerns. Yet these necessary efforts inevitably divert attention, focus, and capacity away from India's broader Indo-Pacific ambitions, forcing difficult trade-offs between neighborhood management and wider strategic engagement.

Ultimately, India's Indo-Pacific ambitions are shaped not only by great power dynamics but also by the weight of internal constraints and regional entanglements. Economic pressures, cautious diplomatic positioning, the imperative of strategic autonomy, and persistent neighborhood volatility all combine to constrain India's ability to fully realize its strategic potential. To emerge as a credible Indo-Pacific leader, India must strike a delicate balance—aligning domestic priorities with external ambitions, reconciling its independent foreign policy with the expectations of like-minded partners, and managing neighborhood instability without sacrificing its broader strategic vision. How effectively India manages these intertwined challenges will determine whether its aspirations translate into a durable influence in the Indo-Pacific's evolving security and economic order.

India's Aspiration for Leadership in the Global South

India's increasingly assertive role in global affairs reflects not only its ambition to shape the Indo-Pacific but also its determination to challenge the traditional Western-dominated rule-making structure of the international system. While India has consistently voiced support for a rules-based international order—first prominently articulated at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue and now a regular feature of its diplomatic language⁵²—it has also been vocal in criticizing the exclusionary nature of many global institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN).

At the 2024 UN summit, India's Intelligence Bureau Director underscored this view by pointing to Africa's limited representation on the UN Security Council, despite the continent accounting for over half of the Council's active agenda.⁵³ India's position reflects its broader advocacy for a more inclusive and representative global governance structure.

India is actively leveraging its rising influence to serve as a bridge between the Global South and Global North, championing issues such as equitable economic development and expanded access to technology. Its leadership role in key multilateral forums like the United Nations, G20, and BRICS demonstrates a consistent commitment to amplifying the voices and priorities of developing nations. Notably, India played a prominent role in the historic induction of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023,⁵⁴ reinforcing its position as a leading advocate for Global South inclusion. Furthermore, the expansion of BRICS to incorporate Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates has bolstered India's ambitions to shape the agenda on critical global issues and strengthen its leadership role within the Global South.

The BRICS Expansion: Implications for India

India occupies a distinctive and strategic position within BRICS. As the bloc's most Western-aligned member, India seeks to act as a bridge between the Global South and established Western powers, leveraging BRICS not as an anti-Western platform but as a vehicle for advancing alternative,

non-Western approaches to global governance.⁵⁵ This balancing act has positioned India as arguably one of the primary beneficiaries of BRICS' recent expansion, enabling it to amplify its global influence while simultaneously maintaining constructive ties with Western partners.

Indian leaders have consistently framed BRICS as a pluralistic, non-confrontational coalition rather than an adversarial bloc. This framing was reaffirmed at the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, where President Vladimir Putin echoed India's view, emphasizing that BRICS is "not anti-Western; it's just non-Western."⁵⁶ Such a positioning allows India to align with a broad range of partners and advocate for the interests of the Global South without adopting a purely oppositional stance toward the West.

At the same summit, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar underscored India's leadership ambitions within the Global South, declaring, "The Global South has a high degree of trust and expectation from India." However, India's regional ambitions are tempered by significant challenges at home. Persistent issues—poverty, unemployment, infrastructural shortfalls, and internal social divisions—complicate its ability to project leadership consistently. Externally, India must also navigate the expanding regional influence of China, whose own assertive outreach within BRICS and the Global South presents both competition and constraint for India's aspirations.

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 Narendra Modi held sideline talks to address their prolonged border tensions.⁵⁷ This dialogue marked a cautious step toward rebuilding trust following the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash—a deadly confrontation that shattered longstanding confidence-building mechanisms and intensified bilateral mistrust.

India and China represent two competing visions for the Asian order. While Beijing's BRI advances a China-centric model of regional connectivity and influence, India champions a multipolar Asia where power is more evenly distributed among states. This divergence fuels New Delhi's deepening concerns about China's intention, particularly as Beijing consolidates influence over smaller South Asian and Indo-Pacific neighbors. India's push to position itself as a leader of the Global South is, in part, a strategic counterweight to China's regional dominance, allowing it to challenge Beijing's influence without resorting to direct military confrontation.

Yet the India-China relationship is further complicated by significant economic interdependence. In FY 2024, China accounted for 5.8% of India's exports and 14.8% of its imports, making it India's largest trading partner.⁵⁸ This entanglement necessitates diplomatic caution: any move toward economic decoupling or confrontation would carry substantial costs for India's growth and supply chain resilience.

In response, India has pursued an active diversification strategy—strengthening diplomatic and economic ties beyond China. Engagement in multilateral frameworks like the Quad provides New Delhi with critical avenues to balance Beijing’s influence while hedging against overdependence. By cultivating a broad network of regional and global partnerships, India aims to enhance its security and economic resilience and position itself as a credible alternative to China in infrastructure, technology, and regional leadership.

However, despite these efforts, India has yet to fully translate its strategic positioning into sustained foreign investment inflows or comparable regional influence in sectors like infrastructure development, where China remains dominant. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve, India’s challenge will be to navigate this competitive environment with agility, adapting its strategies to seize emerging opportunities, manage risks, and help shape a more inclusive and balanced global order.

The Future of India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

India’s ascent as a major Indo-Pacific power is reshaping regional dynamics. Its multifaceted approach—rooted in strategic partnerships, regional initiatives, and a commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—holds significant promise for advancing regional stability and prosperity. Yet, India’s ambitions face real constraints: domestic economic and social challenges, the demands of balancing strategic autonomy, and the persistent volatility of its neighborhood.

Addressing these challenges effectively will be essential if India is to solidify its role as a leading regional power and actively shape an inclusive, rules-based order.

Strong regional and global partnerships will be critical to India's success. A failure to assert its position on key issues risks undermining India's role as a stabilizing force and diminishing its ability to counter China's growing influence. Reaffirming its commitment to a rules-based international system will preserve India's stature and influence across regional and global arenas.

As the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, India must adapt to meet new challenges and seize emerging opportunities. Several key factors will shape the future trajectory of India's Indo-Pacific engagement:

1. Navigating the Evolving Regional Order

The Indo-Pacific is marked by a fluid interplay of forces, including the rise of China, intensifying U.S.-China competition, and persistent regional flashpoints. India will need a nuanced strategy that preserves its strategic autonomy while forging strong alignments with like-minded partners to safeguard its interests and promote regional stability.

2. Harnessing Emerging Technologies

Advances in AI, cyber capabilities, and space technologies will increasingly define the Indo-Pacific security and economic contours. India must invest in developing these capabilities—not only to maintain its

strategic edge but also to play an active role in shaping the emerging norms, rules, and governance frameworks surrounding their use.

3. Advancing Global Aspirations

India's rising economic and military power brings heightened global expectations. As it takes a more prominent voice in global governance institutions, India will need to strengthen its diplomatic capacity, increase its engagement in multilateral forums, and demonstrate sustained commitment to upholding international norms and a rules-based order.

4. Strengthening Domestic Foundations

India's ability to sustain its Indo-Pacific ambitions will ultimately hinge on its success at home. Promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, enhancing social cohesion, and modernizing infrastructure are not just domestic priorities—they are prerequisites for sustaining defense modernization,⁵⁹ diplomatic outreach, and regional connectivity projects.

5. Deepening Security Cooperation

Robust security partnerships will be central to navigating the Indo-Pacific's competitive environment. Priority areas for India include:

- **Maritime Security:** Advancing joint domain awareness, conducting complex naval exercises, and facilitating technology transfers.

- **Counterterrorism:** Enhancing intelligence sharing, expanding capacity-building programs, and conducting joint operational exercises.
- **Cybersecurity:** Establishing information-sharing frameworks, developing regional cyber codes of conduct, and conducting joint cyber drills.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy remains a work in progress—but its success will depend on how effectively New Delhi can navigate the region's shifting power dynamics, leverage technological advancements, address domestic challenges, and deepen cooperation with key partners. If India can rise to meet these complexities, it will not only advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific but also secure its place as a central architect of the region's future stability and prosperity.

Conclusion: Navigating Complexity in the Indo-Pacific

India's emergence as a major power is reshaping and influencing global dynamics. Its approach blends active multilateral engagement, a professed commitment to rules-based order, and an increasingly proactive response to shared global challenges. This was exemplified by India's 2023 G20 presidency, where it championed initiatives on digital transformation and sustainable development under the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future."⁶⁰ India's leadership in the G20 demonstrated its determination to position itself as a responsible global actor, capable of advancing cooperative solutions on issues of transnational significance.

The current era of polycrisis—marked by the convergence of pandemics, geopolitical tensions, environmental emergencies, and economic disruptions—presents India with both profound challenges and unprecedented opportunities. Programs like *Vaccine Maitri*, which delivered COVID-19 vaccine support to over 90 countries,⁶¹ and India's co-founding of the International Solar Alliance to act as a stabilizing force and a champion for sustainable, inclusive development, particularly for the Global South. These initiatives reinforce India's positioning as not only a regional power but also as a globally engaged problem-solver in an unpredictable world.

At the diplomatic level, India's posture of strategic autonomy allows it to engage with a diverse array of global actors while preserving policy independence. This balancing act is evident in India's simultaneous participation in the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, and its longstanding defense and energy ties with Russia. It also reflects the pragmatism underpinning India's foreign policy, where deepening partnerships—such as the India-U.S. strategic relationship—coexist with continued economic engagements with Iran and Russia, including high-profile defense acquisitions like the S-400 missile system.⁶² India's rising role as a defense exporter further signals its ambition to shape the global security landscape, with the United States, France, and Armenia among its growing list of defense clients.⁶³

Yet India's global ambitions face significant domestic headwinds.⁶⁴ Social fractures rooted in religion,⁶⁵ caste,

regional disparities,⁶⁶ and economic inequality risk undermining the internal cohesion needed to sustain long-term international leadership.⁶⁷ Externally, shifting geopolitical fault lines—such as the Ukraine war, intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, and global concerns over democratic backsliding⁶⁸—complicate India's efforts to maintain broad-based partnerships. While the United States has supported India's rise, historical tensions and lingering skepticism within India remain, fueled by past U.S. policies, including sanctions and military ties with Pakistan.⁶⁹ Conversely, Russia's consistent diplomatic support has fostered a perception of reliability, adding further complexity to India's geopolitical balancing act.

As India's global profile expands, it must adapt its diplomatic strategies to navigate an increasingly multipolar, competitive, and contested world. This will require investment in institutional capacity, a sustained commitment to multilateralism, and the cultivation of partnerships that enable India to exercise its influence responsibly and effectively. India aspires to shape a multipolar order that upholds sovereignty, respects international law, and promotes regional cooperation, all the while preserving its cherished strategic autonomy.

However, the path to enduring leadership demands more than material power; it requires principled stances on democracy, human rights, and international norms. Lasting credibility is built not just through military and economic strength but through the consistent application of values, even when doing so entails diplomatic costs. For India, striking the

right balance between strategic restraint and principled engagement will be crucial in building the soft power and global reputation necessary to consolidate its role as both a regional anchor and a respected global actor.

India's Indo-Pacific engagement reflects its broader aspirations: to advance regional stability, assert leadership among developing nations, and help shape a rules-based order responsive to today's interconnected challenges. By skillfully balancing autonomy with active multilateralism, India is positioning itself as a central player in navigating the complexities of an Indo-Pacific region that is fast becoming the geopolitical and economic fulcrum of the 21st century.

Endnotes

- ¹ This chapter, originally titled "India's Rise in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Autonomy in Action," was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, edited by James M. Minnich (2025), <https://doi.org/10.71236/KGOK1078>. The current version has been updated and retitled for publication in this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.
- ² Lee Kuan Yew, paraphrased from *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- ³ Aparna Pande, "Nehru Said India's Global Rise Was 'Inevitable'. This Belief Now Defines Our Foreign Policy," *Hudson Institute*, August 1, 2020, <https://www.hudson.org/domestic-policy/nehru-said-india-s-global-rise-was-inevitable-this-belief-now-defines-our-foreign-policy>.
- ⁴ C. Raja Mohan, "Non-Alignment, Nationalism, and the Quad," *Observer Research Foundation*, April 13, 2021,

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/non-alignment-nationalism-and-the-quad>.

- ⁵ Udai Bhanu Singh, “Five Years of India’s Act East Policy and the Way Ahead,” *Diplomatist*, March 4, 2020, <https://diplomatist.com/2020/03/04/five-years-of-indias-act-east-policy-and-the-way-ahead/>.
- ⁶ Rahul Mishra, “India as a Net Security Provider in the Indo-Pacific: Ambitious but Attainable,” *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/india-as-a-net-security-provider-in-the-indo-pacific-ambitious-but-attainable/>.
- ⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Embassy of India, Jakarta, “Government of India Expresses Solidarity With the Government and the People of Indonesia on the Solemn Occasion of Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster Commemoration,” December 24, 2014, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/CountryNews/3398_Press_Release_-_Government_of_India_expresses_solidarity_with_the_Government_and_the_people_of_Indonesia_on_the_solemn_occasion_of_Indian_Ocean_Tsunami_Disaster_commemoration.pdf.
- ⁸ “China Lays Claim to Galwan Valley, Blames India for Border Clash,” *Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/20/china-lays-claim-to-galwan-valley-blames-india-for-border-clash>; Hemant Adlakha, “The Tawang Clash: The View from China,” *The Diplomat*, December 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/the-tawang-clash-the-view-from-china>.
- ⁹ Center for Preventative Action, “Conflict Between India and Pakistan,” *Global Conflict Tracker*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>.
- ¹⁰ Gaurav Sen, “China is Helping Modernize the Pakistan Navy. What Does That Mean for India?,” *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/china-is-helping-modernize-the-pakistan-navy-what-does-that-mean-for-india/>.
- ¹¹ Shyam Tekwani, “Pakistan’s ‘Three Evils’, CPEC and Good Governance,” *East Asia Forum*, November 26, 2020,

<https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/26/pakistans-three-evils-cpec-and-good-governance/>.

- ¹² Shyam Tekwani, “Political Violence in South Asia, 1995-2020,” in *Hindsight, Insight, Foresight: Thinking About Security in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Alexander Vuving (Honolulu, HI: DKI APCSS, 2020), 91-109, <https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/06-tekwani-25A.pdf>.
- ¹³ Bruce Riedel, “Mumbai Attacks: Four Years Later,” *Brookings*, November 26, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mumbai-attacks-four-years-later/>.
- ¹⁴ Adam McCauley, “The Most Dangerous Waters in the World,” *Time Magazine*, accessed November 7, 2024, <https://time.com/piracy-southeast-asia-malacca-strait/>.
- ¹⁵ Khyati Singh and Gaurav Sen, “India’s Anti-Piracy Mission Were Years in the Making,” *The Diplomat*, February 19, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/indias-anti-piracy-missions-were-years-in-the-making/>.
- ¹⁶ Pushpita Das, “Drug Trafficking in India: A Case for Border Security,” *IDSA Occasional Paper* no. 24, (New Delhi, India: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, May 2012), https://www.idsa.in/system/files/OP_DrugTraffickinginIndia.pdf.
- ¹⁷ “Trafficking in the Sahel: Cracking Down on Illicit Drugs,” *UN News*, May 5, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149346>.
- ¹⁸ Press Trust of India, “India’s Highest-Ever Drug Bust: 3,300 kg Narcotics Seized off Gujarat Coast,” *Business Standard*, February 28, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-s-highest-ever-drug-bust-3-300-kg-narcotics-seized-off-gujarat-coast-124022800862_1.html.
- ¹⁹ Mely Caballero-Anthony, “A Hidden Scourge,” International Monetary Fund, *Finance & Development Magazine*, September 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/09/human-trafficking-in-southeast-asia->

caballero#:~:text=After%20Typhoon%20Haiyan%2C%20one%20of, human%20trafficking%20remains%20relatively%20unexplored.

- 20 Shyam Tekwani, “In War on Terror and ISIS, South Asia is Fighting Itself,” *South China Morning Post*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3116940/war-terror-and-isis-south-asia-fighting-itself>.
- 21 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “India-US 2+2 Dialogue,” December 31, 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1557922>.
- 22 Prashant Jha, “TRUST Replaces iCET: New Brand, Old Spirit on Tech Partnership,” *Hindustan Times*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/trust-replaces-icet-new-brand-old-spirit-on-tech-partnership-101739524899203.html>.
- 23 The White House, “Fact Sheet: United States and India Elevate Strategic Partnership with the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET),” January 31, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/31/fact-sheet-united-states-and-india-elevate-strategic-partnership-with-the-initiative-on-critical-and-emerging-technology-icet/>.
- 24 U.S. Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: India–U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X),” February 21, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3682879/fact-sheet-india-us-defense-acceleration-ecosystem-indus-x/>.
- 25 The White House, “United States-India Joint Leaders’ Statement,” February 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/>.
- 26 Sibi George, “Japan–India Engagement is Expanding Amid Strategic Challenges,” *Nikkei Asia*, January 26, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-India-engagement-is-expanding-amid-strategic-challenges>.
- 27 PTI, “India-Japan Defence Partnership Vital to Ensure Free, Open Indo-Pacific, Says Government,” *The Hindu*, August 19, 2024,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-and-japan-to-hold-22-dialogue-in-new-delhi-on-august-20-2024/article68542693.ece>.

- 28 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Japan Defense Ties to Get a Boost With Modi-Abe Virtual Summit,” *Observer Research Foundation*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-japan-defense-ties-to-get-a-boost-with-modi-abe-virtual-summit>.
- 29 Shyam Tekwani, “Cartographers of Quiet Power,” *Security Nexus*, April 16, 2025, https://dkiapcss.edu/nexus_articles/cartographers-of-quiet-power/.
- 30 Dinakar Peri, “India Delivers First Batch of BrahMos to Philippines,” *The Hindu*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-delivers-first-batch-of-brahmos-to-philippines/article68084161.ece>.
- 31 Tekwani, “Cartographers of Quiet Power.”
- 32 Press Trust of India, “ONGC Videsh Secures Contract Extension for Vietnam Oil Blocks,” *Economic Times*, August 19, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/ovl-secures-contract-extension-for-vietnam-oil-blocks/articleshow/112626501.cms?from=mdr>.
- 33 “In a First, India Gifts Active Warship to Vietnam,” *Reuters*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/first-india-gifts-active-warship-vietnam-2023-06-28/>.
- 34 Yuji Nitta, “India, Vietnam Foreign Ministers Confirm Aligned National Interests,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 17, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/India-Vietnam-foreign-ministers-confirm-aligned-national-interests>.
- 35 Tommy Walker, “What is Behind Vietnam’s Economic Success Story?,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-behind-vietnams-economic-success-story/a-70501290>.
- 36 Government of India, Embassy of India–Hanoi, “India-Vietnam Trade and Economic Relations,” accessed November 11, 2024,

<https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/economic-and-commercial/>.

- ³⁷ Jaideep Mazumdar, “India and Vietnam Sign Nine Agreements to Deepen Strategic Partnership and Enhance Cooperation,” *DD News*, August 2, 2024, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/india-and-vietnam-sign-nine-agreements-to-deepen-strategic-partnership-enhance-cooperation/>.
- ³⁸ Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “Advancing Maritime Security for a Sustainable Future,” September 16, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1958025>.
- ³⁹ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “India and the United States Spearhead Global Disaster Resilience Efforts Through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), April 25, 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/india/press-releases/apr-25-2024-india-and-united-states-spearhead-global-disaster-resilience-efforts-through-coalition-disaster-resilient-infrastructure-cdri>.
- ⁴⁰ Government of India, National Biodiversity Authority, “ASEAN-India Cooperation Project, accessed November 7, 2024, <http://nbaindia.org/asean-india/Pg.html>.
- ⁴¹ U.S. Trade Representative, “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF),” May 2022, <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/agreements-under-negotiation/indo-pacific-economic-framework-prosperity-ipef>.
- ⁴² Shyam Tekwani, “Deterrence Needs a Factory: Fixing the U.S.–India Industrial Gap,” *Security Nexus*, April 09, 2025, https://dkiapcss.edu/nexus_articles/deterrence-needs-a-factory-fixing-the-u-s-india-industrial-gap/.
- ⁴³ Kartik Bommakanti, “Defence Budget 2024: A Tough Balancing Act,” *Observer Research Foundation*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/defence-budget-2024-a-tough-balancing-act>.
- ⁴⁴ Surupa Gupta and Sumit Ganguly, “Why India Refused to Join the World’s Biggest Trading Bloc,” *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2020,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/23/why-india-refused-to-join-rcep-worlds-biggest-trading-bloc/>.

- 45 Shashank Mattoo, “Why India is Losing Out on CPTPP,” *Observer Research Foundation*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/why-india-is-losing-out-on-cptpp>.
- 46 Alex Seitz-Wald and Sahil Kapur, “As the World Rallies to Condemn Russia, India Remains Silent on the Sidelines,” *NBC News*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/world-rallies-condemn-russia-india-remains-silent-sidelines-rcna18653>.
- 47 Ashley Tellis, “‘What Is in Our Interest’: India and the Ukraine War,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 25, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/04/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-the-ukraine-war?lang=en>.
- 48 Asian News International, “India Abstains From UN Vote to Probe Iran’s Alleged Human Rights Violation,” *NDTV News*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-abstains-from-un-vote-to-probe-irans-alleged-human-rights-violation-3553258>.
- 49 Yeshi Seli, “India Abstain From UN Vote on Release of Aung San Suu Kyi, End Myanmar Strife,” *The New Indian Express*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2022/Dec/23/india-abstain-from-unvote-on-release-of-aung-san-suu-kyi-end-myanmar-strife-2530986.html>.
- 50 Shyam Tekwani, “India’s Bullying of its Neighbours Boosted China. Now it Needs to Build a Strong Backyard,” *South China Morning Post*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3091070/indias-bullying-its-neighbours-boosted-china-now-it-needs-build>.
- 51 “Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu Says ‘No One has License to Bully Us’ Amid Diplomatic Row With India,” *Mint*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/indiamaldives-row-president-mohamed-muizzu-says-no-one-has-license-to-bully-us-11705155766488.html>.

- ⁵² Narendra Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue,” Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri_La_Dialogue_June_01_2018.
- ⁵³ Press Trust of India, “India Asks Caution on UNSC Actions not Representative of Current Realities,” *Business Standard*, July 4, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-asks-caution-on-unscc-actions-not-representative-of-current-realities-124070300868_1.html.
- ⁵⁴ Kallol Bhattacharjee, “G-20 | African Union Becomes Permanent Member,” *The Hindu*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/g-20-african-union-becomes-permanent-member-under-indias-presidency/article67287988.ece>.
- ⁵⁵ Michael Kugelman, “India’s Balancing Act With the West as Brics Flexes New Muscles,” *BBC*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clj2verz8ggo>.
- ⁵⁶ “Putin Echoes PM Modi’s Stance on BRICS, Says ‘it’s not Anti-Western; it’s Just Non-Western’,” *Asia News International*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/putin-echoes-pm-modis-stance-on-brics-says-its-not-anti-western-its-just-non-western20241018213921/>.
- ⁵⁷ Rishi Gupta, “After Modi-Xi Meet in Kazan, Will Rhetoric Be Matched by Action?,” *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/after-modi-xi-meet-in-kazan-will-the-rhetoric-be-matched-by-action/>.
- ⁵⁸ Dharendra Kumar and Rhik Kundu, “India’s Goods Trade Deficit Widens to \$27 Billion in October,” *Mint*, November 14, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/economy/indias-goods-trade-deficit-widens-to-27-billion-in-october-11731578131321.html>; Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “China Overtakes US as India’s Top Trading Partner in FY24: GTRI,” May 13, 2024, <https://indbiz.gov.in/china-overtakes-us-as-indias-top-trading-partner-in-fy24-gtri/>.

- ⁵⁹ Shyam Tekwani, “From Factory to Frontline: Why U.S.–India Drone Collaboration Could Shape the Next Era of Deterrence,” *Security Nexus*, April 16, 2025, https://dkiapcss.edu/nexus_articles/from-factory-to-frontline-why-u-s-india-drone-collaboration-could-shape-the-next-era-of-deterrence/.
- ⁶⁰ Government of India, Ministry of Earth Sciences, “Overview of G20,” accessed November 7, 2024, https://moes.gov.in/g20-india-2023/moes-g20?language_content_entity=en.
- ⁶¹ Ashok Sajjanhar, “India’s ‘Vaccine Maitri’ Initiative,” *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, January 29, 2021, <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/indias-vaccine-maitri-initiative-asajjanhar-290121>.
- ⁶² Richard M. Rossow and Kriti Upadhyaya, “Assessing India’s CAATSA Sanctions Waiver Eligibility,” *The Diplomat*, February 12, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/assessing-indias-caatsa-sanctions-waiver-eligibility/>.
- ⁶³ Asia News International, “U.S., France, Armenia emerge as India’s Top Three Defence Export Customers,” *The Hindu*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/us-france-armenia-emerge-as-indias-top-three-defence-export-customers/article68805429.ece>.
- ⁶⁴ Mujib Mashal and Hari Kumar, “Can India’s Global Ambitions Survive Its Deepening Chasms at Home?,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/07/world/asia/g20-india-modi.html>.
- ⁶⁵ Samanth Subramanian, “How Hindu Supremacists are Tearing India Apart,” *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>.
- ⁶⁶ Ashoka Mody, “India’s Fake Growth Story,” *Project Syndicate*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-growth-rate-flawed-accounting-ignores-growing-problems-by-ashoka-mody-2023-09>.

- ⁶⁷ Toru Takahashi, “Why India as New Superpower Could Spell Trouble for the West,” *Nikkei Asia*, January 29, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Why-India-as-new-superpower-could-spell-trouble-for-the-West>.
- ⁶⁸ “India’s Democratic Backsliding,” *Financial Times*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c98e1aa-85da-4738-b889-fc4d76d1d0bc>.
- ⁶⁹ Ashley J. Tellis, “The Evolution of U.S.-Indian Ties: Missile Defense in an Emerging Strategic Relationship,” *International Security* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 113–151, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137531>.