

A New Security Environment and India's Evolving Asia-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

India's ties to the Asia-Pacific region have attained strategic level engagement. Its political, economic and military overtures signify trans-regional aspirations. The power equation in Asia-Pacific revolves around China's growth and the Washington's 'rebalancing' strategies. India's alliance with the United States (US) has enabled it to become part of various US-led regional organisations; and its deepening military and strategic partnership with Japan and Australia point to a likely role in the region's security architecture. In this backdrop, the subject paper looks at India's 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies. It analyses whether geopolitical developments, given the new 'Indo-Pacific' mantra and China's naval posture, have engendered competitive tendencies and if India will emerge as a balancer in regional politics.

Keywords: Balance of Power, Look East, Act East, Pivot to Asia, Quad, South China Sea, Maritime Security.

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Introduction

India's political leadership had long visualised relations with Asia-Pacific. A few months prior to its independence, Jawaharlal Nehru presented the idea to create an all-Asia platform at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947.¹ In his book *The Discovery of India*, Nehru referred to the importance of Asia Pacific: 'though not directly a Pacific state, India will inevitably exercise an important influence there. India will also develop as the centre of economic and political activity in the Indian Ocean area, in Southeast Asia, right up to the Middle East. Her position gives an economic and strategic importance in a part of the world which is going to develop in the future.'²

India has established political relations with countries of Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and Oceania, and is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),³ ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF),⁴ and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight Forum (China, Japan, the Republic Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States (US) and the Russian Federation).⁵ It is also part of various regional infrastructure projects like Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC)⁶ and Myanmar-Thailand-Laos-Cambodia-Vietnam

¹ Ashwani Jassal and Priya Gahlot, "India as a Rising Power in the Asia Pacific – The Success and the Challenges" (paper presented at ISA International Conference 2017, Hong Kong, June 15-17, 2017), <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/f23d219e-8f76-4457-850f-fc9b14c3eb0d.PDF>.

² Ibid.

³ Rup Narayan Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," in *Asian Strategic Review 2014: US Pivot and Asian Security*, eds. S. D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014), 220, https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book_ASR2013_0.pdf.

⁴ Tien-sze Fang, "India's Pivot to the Asia Pacific and the Transformation of Its International Role" (paper presented at ISA International Conference 2017, Hong Kong, June 15-17, 2017), 19, <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/56e36657-5d52-4905-8775-3696db05cc02.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Arvind Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," in *Asian Strategic Review 2014: US Pivot and Asian Security*, eds. S. D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014), 215-216, https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book_ASR2013_0.pdf.

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(Mekong Ganga Cooperation-MGC).⁷ In addition to this, India is involved in regional naval exercises like *Malabar* (with the Japanese and American navies)⁸ and *SIMBEX* (with Singapore).⁹ India's interest in the region is also to safeguard the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs, Annex 1) as its trade traverses from Russian oil fields of Sakhalin (North Pacific Ocean) to Mangalore (Southern India) via Malacca (Southeast Asia)¹⁰ (Annex 2). To ensure the safe passage of its oil and trade supplies, India has established the Far Eastern Command (Andaman and Nicobar Islands).¹¹ In May 2016, India repositioned a guided-missile frigate-INS *Karmuk* to the Islands.¹² It also funds the 'Tripartite Technical Expert Group-TTEG' which administers the Malacca Strait¹³ (Annex 3). Thus, India's Eastward move entails strategic interests as well as political gains.

On the geopolitical side, India is a strategic partner of the US as the latter's 'pivot to Asia' and 'rebalance strategy' in the region.¹⁴ The US-India's convergence of interests was highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the Joint Session of the US Congress in June 2016:

⁷ Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific."

⁸ Fang, "India's Pivot to the Asia Pacific and the Transformation of Its International Role," 16.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Manjeet S. Pardesi, "India, US in East Asia: Emerging Strategic Partnership," (paper, RSIS Commentaries no. 54/2011, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2011), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/1526-india-us-in-east-asia-emerg/#.W79rb_kzbZ4.

¹¹ Abhijit Singh, *The Nautical Dimension of India's 'Act East' Policy*, report (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2018), 12, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PR180409_The-Nautical-Dimension-of-Indias-Act-East-Policy.pdf.

¹² Abraham Samuel, *Emerging Indo-Pacific Geopolitics: Challenges and Opportunities for India* (Ministry of Defence, Government of Japan, 2018), 105, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/SSG/review/8-1-s/8-1-6.pdf>.

¹³ Adil Rashid, "Maritime Security Dynamics in Indian Ocean: Pak-China-India" in *Major Powers' Interests in Indian Ocean: Challenges and Options for Pakistan* (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2014), 121, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Indian-ocean.pdf>.

¹⁴ Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: Quo Vadis in 2017," *Pacific Focus* 33, no. 2 (August 2018): 179-208 (180), <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12115>.

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India is already assuming her responsibilities in securing the Indian Ocean region. A strong India-US partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from Indian Ocean to the Pacific.¹⁵

India's defence ties with ASEAN countries,¹⁶ strategic partnership with Australia¹⁷ and Japan,¹⁸ and being part of maritime arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD or Quad)¹⁹ highlight 'deeper engagement' with the region and an emerging role in the 'region's politics'.²⁰ India has also been vocal on political issues, in particular, it has supported the Philippines and Vietnam on the South China Sea issue. The Delhi Declaration, adopted at the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in January 2018, reiterated 'ASEAN-India common stance on the South China Sea.' The Declaration called for peaceful resolution of the dispute in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (1982) and an early implementation of the South China Sea Code of Conduct.²¹

By allying with ASEAN states, India is trying to emerge as a reliable security partner in the region. India's political overtures might be welcomed by Southeast Asian countries and US allies in the region (in particular Australia and Japan), however, its interference in the South China Sea and

¹⁵ Fang, "India's Pivot to the Asia Pacific and the Transformation of Its International Role," 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Danielle Rajendram, "India's New Asia- Pacific Strategy: Modi Acts East," (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, December 2014), 11, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/indias-new-asia-pacific-strategy-modi-acts-east.pdf>.

¹⁸ S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra, "Act East Policy (2014-): How Different, How Successful?" in *India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2019), 219.

¹⁹ Vinay Kaura, "India-Indonesia Relations and Indo-Pacific Security," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 437, August 15, 2018, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/india-indonesia-relations-and-indo-pacific-security>.

²⁰ Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," 215.

²¹ Vibhanshu Shekhar, "India's Relations with ASEAN: Posture Versus Reality," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 412, February 13, 2018, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb412.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=36519>.

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exploration of hydrocarbons (Indian state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission Videsh Limited has signed an agreement with Petro-Vietnam to explore hydrocarbons)²² might provoke resentment from China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has expressed reservations over New Delhi's involvement in South China Sea affairs:

As for oil and gas exploration activities, our consistent position is that we are opposed to any country engaged in oil and gas exploration and development activities in waters under China's jurisdiction. We hope foreign countries do not get involved in the South China Sea dispute.²³

From 'Look East' to 'Act East' Policy

India's 'Look East Policy'

India's 'Look East Policy' was initiated in early 1990s, and it primarily focused on enhancing ties with Southeast Asian economies.²⁴ Geopolitical developments during this period saw the Gulf War, which inadvertently led to 'economic recession and an acute balance-of-payments crisis for Indian economy.' Hence, steps into the ASEAN region were taken to explore new avenues of economic and trade opportunities, and deter fiscal fallouts.

The policy to 'Look East' was also compelled by certain other structural changes at regional and global levels. In this regard, the collapse of former Soviet Union, and the end of Cold War politics made New Delhi a less influential political actor in the region. Thereby, to cope up with the changes at political front, and to cater to the 'strategic and economic vacuum,' an effort was undertaken to promote ties with Southeast Asia.

²² Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," 216-218.

²³ "India Rebuffs China's Objections to Oil Exploration in South China Sea," *Indian Express*, September 15, 2011, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/print/india-rebuffs-chinas-objections-to-oil-exploration-in-south-china-sea/>.

²⁴ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 3.

China's proximity to Southeast Asia also prompted India to engage with the region.²⁵ China has emerged as a regional power in Asia-Pacific, and as an active player in South Asia (by building seaports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).²⁶

On the domestic front, engagement with Southeast Asia was linked to the development of India's Northeastern states (Arunchal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur share land border with Myanmar, and maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal with Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia).²⁷ The idea being that through connectivity and economic links, these areas would be exposed to development.²⁸ However, over the years, these regions have not benefitted from India-ASEAN economic cooperation. This could be termed as the 'weakness of India's Look East Policy.'²⁹

India's political ties with Southeast Asia - from attaining the Sectoral Dialogue Partner-SDP status (1992) to becoming the Full Dialogue Partner-FDP (1996)³⁰ shows its institutional ingress in Southeast Asia.³¹ The India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is in place since 2009,³² while the India-ASEAN Agreement on Trade in Services and Investments was inked in 2015,³³ and the trade volume stands to the tune of USD 70 billion.³⁴ India participates in Summit Level Meetings with ASEAN,³⁵ and is also

²⁵ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 2-3.

²⁶ Bart Gaens and Olli Ruohomaki, "India's 'Look East' – 'Act East' Policy: Hedging as a Foreign Policy Tool" (Briefing Paper 222, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 2017), 3, https://storage.googleapis.com/upi-live/2017/10/bp222_indias-look-east--act-east-policy.pdf.

²⁷ Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," 218.

²⁸ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 2 and 3.

²⁹ Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," 216.

³⁰ Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," 220.

³¹ Dhruva Jaishankar, *Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific*, report (New Delhi: Brookings India, 2019), 20, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Acting-East-India-in-the-INDO-PACIFIC-without-cutmark.pdf>.

³² S.D. Muni and Rahul Mishra, "Look East Policy (1992-2014): Streamlining and Restructuring Engagement" in *India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2019), 189..

³³ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," 220.

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represented in the East Asian Summit platform (which has 18 member countries).³⁶

On the bilateral front, Singapore is one of the top sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to India.³⁷ Indonesia provides 60 per cent of India's coal imports.³⁸

Other than 'economic and trade tracks,'³⁹ India has also been enhancing defence and security cooperation with the Asia-Pacific. Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in 2012 called for maritime cooperation to ensure freedom of navigation and safety against transnational threats.⁴⁰ According to the Annual Report (2010-11) of India's Ministry of Defence:

The security situation in East Asia increased security concerns among several nations and underlined the need for initiatives for building trust and confidence in the region. The establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus forum of ten ASEAN and eight non-ASEAN countries, including India is seen as an effort to establish open and inclusive security architecture for the region.⁴¹

The security of SLOCs (Malacca, Sunda and Lombok) are of interest to India,⁴² as 55 per cent of its trade traverses through the Malacca Strait; India ships oil from Russian oil fields of Sakhalin (North Pacific Ocean) to Mangalore in Southern India transiting from Singapore and Malacca (Southeast Asia).⁴³ The smooth passage of trade and oil supplies through the

³⁶ Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," 220.

³⁷ Gaens and Ruohomaki, "India's 'Look East' – 'Act East' Policy," 6.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," 222.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 220.

⁴¹ Ibid., 221.

⁴² Ibid., 220-221.

⁴³ Pardesi, "India, US in East Asia."

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Strait is critical for India's economy. Any disruption in trade flows by a 'strategic competitor' might put India's economy at a risk.⁴⁴

Within its 'Look East' framework, India has not confined engagement with ASEAN states alone, rather it has extended the 'geographic focus' to Northeast Asia and Oceania as well. With increased political interaction with the countries of Asia-Pacific, India's policy in the region has become multipronged, encompassing political, economic and security interests. On the geopolitical front, the power equation in Asia Pacific,⁴⁵ US-China competition; the ASEAN states' skepticism over China's regional profile; and conflicting claims in South China Sea define India's strategic vision in the region.

The US' political and military leadership has supported India's regional role on multiple forums. In his address to the Indian Parliament in November 2010, former US President Barack Obama highlighted that:

More broadly, India and the US can partner in Asia. Today, the US is once again playing a leadership role in Asia-strengthening old alliances; deepening relationships, as we are doing with China; and we are reengaging with regional organisations like the ASEAN and joining the East Asia Summit – organisations in which India is also a partner. Like your neighbours in Southeast Asia, we want India not only to 'Look East'; we want India to 'Engage East' because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations.⁴⁶

President Obama made a similar pledge in front of the Australian Parliament in November 2011 and 'urged India to play a larger role as an Asian Power.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 3-4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁴⁶ Das, "America's Pivot to Asia and India's Nuanced Approach," 224.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

India's 'Act East Policy'

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has upgraded diplomatic interaction with Asia-Pacific. The new term coined to describe this political transition is 'Act East Policy'. The policy was announced during the India-ASEAN Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw in November 2014 – 'An era of economic development, industrialisation and trade has begun in India. India's "Look East Policy" has become "Act East Policy."'”⁴⁸ The statement, while referring to economic growth, promotes the idea of India's emerging political clout. It points towards India's trans-regional aspiration and envisioning a larger political role globally. The 'Act East Policy' indicates that India wants to have an 'active' and 'prominent strategic role' in Asia-Pacific.⁴⁹

On the domestic front, development of India's Northeastern states, located close to Southeast Asia, has been identified as a priority in this policy. Efforts are being directed to improve connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asian capitals through road and air links.⁵⁰ Some of the initiatives include the 'India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Friendship Highway' and 'Kaladan Multi-Modal Project' (connecting Sittwe on Bay of Bengal coast in Myanmar with Indian state of Mizoram).⁵¹

Key Relations within the Asia-Pacific

ASEAN

In January 2018, leaders from ASEAN countries visited India to commemorate the 25 years of India-ASEAN ties. The ASEAN leaders also attended the Republic Day celebrations (January 26, 2018).⁵²

India's relations with ASEAN have been central to the former's ingress in the larger Asia-Pacific. The India-ASEAN political interaction encompasses military ties along with economic relations. Competitive

⁴⁸ Muni and Mishra, "Act East Policy (2014 –)," 197.

⁴⁹ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 3.

⁵⁰ Muni and Mishra, "Act East Policy (2014 –)," 200-215.

⁵¹ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 22.

⁵² Shekhar, "India's Relations with ASEAN."

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tendencies at the regional front, in particular conflicting claims in South China Sea, puts the Southeast Asian countries at odds with China. To counter Chinese domination in the region, ASEAN states are fortifying ties with India. In this context, the strategic component, which has reinforced the India-ASEAN partnership, is the power competition prompted by China's growth and its impact on the region:

China's assertive stance on South China Sea has given India the opportunity to enhance its strategic presence in Southeast Asia, and ASEAN states are increasingly looking towards India to play a balancing role in the region.⁵³

This aspect was highlighted by the late Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj during the 12th India-ASEAN meeting in August 2014: 'The ASEAN-India strategic partnership owes its strength to the fact that our 'Look East' to ASEAN meets your 'Look West' towards India'.⁵⁴ India's naval cooperation with ASEAN countries has been a significant factor in 'deepening India's security partnerships with the region.' The India-ASEAN naval cooperation involves bilateral exercises and multilateral engagement, including the biennial *MILAN* exercise.

India's relations with Vietnam are central to its 'Act East Policy'.⁵⁵ Defence cooperation and the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2016' between the two countries has helped Vietnam in defence build-up. As part of 'India's military diplomacy, USD 500 million were extended to Vietnam to buy weapons' in 2016.⁵⁶ The late Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, during his visit to India in March 2018 appreciated India's 'Act East Policy' and in defence and security cooperation. Other ASEAN countries, pivotal to India's eastward move are Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

⁵³ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Muni and Mishra, "Act East Policy (2014 -)," 223.

Japan

From the countries of Northeast Asia, India puts special emphasis on Japan. According to Prime Minister Modi:

A joining together of the world's third largest economy and, demographically, the second largest market could end up in the creation of the globe's most formidable economic power house, outmaneuvering even the US and China, within the next 12-15 years.⁵⁷

The China factor is central to India and Japan bilateral relations. Japan is concerned about China's 'assertiveness' in the East China Sea,⁵⁸ while India has a territorial dispute over Aksai Chin administered by China, claimed by New Delhi, and Arunachal Pradesh, governed by India and claimed by China.⁵⁹

Japan, being a technologically and industrially advanced country, offers India with economic opportunities. Japan has been active in development of infrastructure in India. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was awarded a contract in November 2014 to build 2000 kilometres long strategic roads along India's disputed border with China. Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) has supported infrastructure projects, including the Delhi Metro, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor and the Chennai Bangalore Industrial Corridor.⁶⁰ Japan has offered to assist New Delhi in building of infrastructure to connect its Northeastern states with Southeast Asia. Accordingly, an 'Act East Forum' has been set up, and Japan has extended a loan of USD 350 million.⁶¹ On India's defence cooperation with Japan, the 'Memorandum of Cooperation and Exchanges in the Field of Defence' is in place since 2014. Both countries also have a 'Special Strategic

⁵⁷ Gaens and Ruohomaki, "India's 'Look East' – 'Act East' Policy," 6.

⁵⁸ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy: Modi Acts East," 7.

⁵⁹ Chietigj Bajpae, "Coming Full-Circle in the Sino-Indian Relationship," Lowy Institute for International Policy, September 12, 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coming-full-circle-sino-indian-relationship-0>.

⁶⁰ Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy," 7.

⁶¹ Shekhar, "India's Relations with ASEAN."

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and Global Partnership.⁶² They are part of the regional maritime exercise *Malabar*,⁶³ and have also increased ‘coordination on freedom of navigation in South China Sea’.⁶⁴ They also have a civil nuclear agreement,⁶⁵ and India might also become receive the Japanese amphibious U2 aircrafts.⁶⁶

Australia

India has a strategic partnership with Australia since 2009 and a ‘Framework for Security Cooperation’ since 2014.⁶⁷ Australia has allowed uranium sale to India despite being a non-Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory country. The Australia-India uranium cooperation shows the geopolitical interests of the two countries.⁶⁸ They have also established a 2+2 Dialogue involving their foreign and defence secretaries.⁶⁹ India-Australia bilateral naval exercise *AUSINDEX*, conducted in the Bay of Bengal is a further display of defence collaboration between the two.⁷⁰

China

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government came into power, India-China relations have progressed on the political and economic side.⁷¹ Bilateral trade stands at USD 92.68 billion.⁷² Besides, summit level

⁶² Muni and Mishra, “Act East Policy (2014 –),” 219.

⁶³ Rajendram, “India’s New Asia Pacific Strategy,” 7.

⁶⁴ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 27.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Huma Siddiqui, “DefExpo 2020: Japanese Amphibious Plane Back on Track for the Indian Navy?” *Financial Express*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/defexpo-2020-japanese-amphibious-plane-back-on-track-for-the-indian-navy/1857302/>.

⁶⁷ Muni and Mishra, “Act East Policy (2014 –),” 219.

⁶⁸ Rajendram, “India’s New Asia Pacific Strategy,” 11.

⁶⁹ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 28.

⁷⁰ Auriol Weigold, “Australia-India Relations: Poised for Another Take-Off?” (paper, Future Directions International, Western Australia, 2019), <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/australia-india-relations-poised-for-another-take-off/>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷² “India, China Trade Declines Over 12 per cent in First Two Months of 2020,” *New Indian Express*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/03/india-china-trade-declines-over-12-per-cent-in-first-two-months-of-2020-2125357.html>.

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interactions are also in place wherein the leadership of both sides discuss bilateral issues. So far, two meetings have been held in Wuhan in April 2018; and in Chennai in October 2019.⁷³

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and President Xi Jinping visits to India in June and September 2014, respectively signified the political warmth on both sides. During these visits, China offered investment of USD 20 billion in industrial and infrastructural development projects to India. However, this political interaction failed to create the desired impact as tensions along the border area, and incursions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have overshadowed goodwill gestures. On the issue of Arunachal Pradesh, Prime Minister Modi has publicly criticised China's stance, by calling it as an 'Expansionist Attitude'. India is also skeptical about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it perceives China expanding its influence in South Asia, with operation of seaports – Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Kyaukphyu (Myanmar). Meanwhile, China sees India's naval presence in South China Sea as a provocative, and exploration activities in waters as a violation of its jurisdiction.⁷⁴

Regional Dynamics of Asia-Pacific and India's Strategic Power Moves

Indo-Pacific

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has emerged from an evolving mental map of the increasingly contiguous Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the growing economic interdependence of states within the region.⁷⁵

⁷³ Amanat Ali Chaudhry, "Xi's Visit to India," *News International*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/546228-xi-s-visit-to-india>.

⁷⁴ "India Rebuffs China's Objections to Oil Exploration in South China Sea," *Indian Express*, September 15, 2011, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/print/india-rebuffs-chinas-objections-to-oil-exploration-in-south-china-sea/>.

⁷⁵ Udayan Das, "Understanding the Indo-Pacific: A Case of Two Rivalries," *South Asian Voices*, December 11, 2019, <https://southasianvoices.org/understanding-the-indo-pacific-a-case-of-two-rivalries/>.

C. Raja Mohan sees ‘the seas of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as single integrated geopolitical theater, called as the Indo-Pacific.’⁷⁶ The definition of ‘Indo-Pacific’ by oceans is suggestive of the significance of the ‘maritime domain’ in strategic thinking.⁷⁷ On the regional front, this concept has gained traction.

Australia’s ‘Defence White Paper 2013’ and the ‘Foreign Policy White Paper 2017’ describe the region as the ‘Indo-Pacific strategic arc.’⁷⁸ Japan has outlined a vision for a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific.’ ASEAN also officially acknowledged the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in 2019.⁷⁹ The US maritime strategy towards the region has also incorporated this political trend by renaming its ‘Pacific Command’ as the ‘Indo-Pacific Command.’⁸⁰

Another dimension of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is linked to India’s larger role in the region. India, no doubt is a littoral state of the Indian Ocean and carries geopolitical influence, but it needs to be understood that the ‘Indo – in Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian Ocean (and not India).’⁸¹ The military dimension, and regional and global players’ concerns to ensure freedom of navigation stems from the fact that the militarisation of South China Sea will reinforce countervailing strategies. For instance, China’s naval power in the Pacific as well as Indian Ocean has led to counterbalancing strategies.⁸² According to Indian analysts Gurpreet Khurana and C. Raja Mohan:

India’s power projection into the Pacific should be to match
China’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean.⁸³

⁷⁶ Fang, “India’s Pivot to the Asia Pacific and the Transformation of its International Role,” 6.

⁷⁷ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 14-15.

⁷⁸ Chengxin Pan, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’ and Geopolitical Anxieties about China’s Rise in the Asian Regional Order,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 4 (2014): 453-469 (454), doi: 10.1080/10357718.2014.884054.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Jagannath Panda, “India’s Continental Connect on Indo-Pacific and Quad 2.0,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 441, September 26, 2018, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/indias-continental-connect-indo-pacific-and-quad-20>.

⁸¹ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 14-15.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Pan, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’ and Geopolitical Anxieties about China’s Rise in the Asian Regional Order,” 461.

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Some geopolitical analysts like Kaplan and Medcalf see the 'Indo-Pacific' as economic driven, and the global players tilt towards the region to secure energy supplies and counter the transnational challenges of terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, etc. This can be a justification, but there have been instances where the states while countering the non-traditional security threats have tried to exclude a particular political actor- China.

Balancing Rising China

China's political standing has led to global attention. In fact, China's economic prowess makes it an 'indispensable force in regional economic and financial integration.'⁸⁴ Former US President Barack Obama once remarked: 'When more than 95 per cent of our potential customers live outside our borders, we can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy.'⁸⁵ The US 'Pivot to Asia' and 'Rebalance Strategy' were directed at ensuring its 'long-term strategy' towards the Asia-Pacific region and promoting Washington as 'East Asia's strategic offshore balancer.'⁸⁶ The US National Security Strategy (2017) has described the 'Indo-Pacific' as a priority region.⁸⁷

China's naval posture is seen by India as a threat: 'India remains concerned with implications of China's evolving military profile in the region.'⁸⁸ China's naval presence stretches from the maritime territory of 'Yellow Sea to East China Sea, and down to the Strait of Taiwan towards the South China Sea'⁸⁹ (see Annex 4). China's military modernisation and active presence in the Indian Ocean has provoked competitive tendencies. As India's Former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba has articulated:

Since 2008, there has been a permanent presence of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean region in the form of anti-piracy escort force. The 31st anti-piracy escort force is presently in the

⁸⁴ Pan, "The 'Indo-Pacific' and Geopolitical Anxieties about China's Rise in the Asian Regional Order," 462.

⁸⁵ Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia," 196.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁷ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 14.

⁸⁸ Pardesi, "India, US in East Asia: Emerging Strategic Partnership."

⁸⁹ Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia," 186-187.

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Gulf of Aden. So, at any given time, there are 6 to 8 Chinese navy ships in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. Also, two years ago, they commissioned their first overseas facility, or base, in Djibouti. The stated aim of this deployment is to protect their trade, which is flowing through this area, from piracy. That included deployed submarines for anti-piracy operations, which is the most unlikely platform to be used for this role. There is no doubt they are spending a huge sum of money in developing their military capability. They are modernizing their forces, they are modernizing the command structure. No navy has grown so rapidly in the last 200 years as the Chinese navy. They've added 80 new ships in the last five years. So, the Chinese navy is a force, and it is a force which is here to stay.⁹⁰

China's influence in South Asia (and 'sense of encirclement') is yet another factor which has been viewed with suspicion by New Delhi. 'Indian concern is further reinforced by the fact that almost '70 per cent of China's arms exports in 2010-14 went to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar – countries along India's periphery.'⁹¹ To address competitive tendencies at the regional front and to have presence in the Asia-Pacific region, India is focusing on the maritime domain. It has established an Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in Gurgaon which will work in coordination with the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore. The Indian Navy has extended its operational outreach in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The zones identified for patrols include 'the Gulf of Aden, the Northern Arabian Sea, the waters around Lakshadweep and the Maldives, the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Seychelles and Mauritius, the Northern Bay of Bengal, the waters around Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Straits of Malacca.' India is also a part of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) that has representation from 21 countries. India, as part of IORA, wants to project its tilt towards regionalism and cooperation in maritime governance.⁹²

⁹⁰ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 17.

⁹¹ Chietigj Bajpae, "China-India Regional Dimensions of the Bilateral Relationship," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 108-145 (117), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-09_Issue-4/Bajpae.pdf.

⁹² Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 17-19.

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The convergence of interests between India and the US in Asia-Pacific stems from both countries' opposition to China's growth. According to a former US diplomat Nicholas Burns, 'the glue that will bind India and the US together is their mutual concern about a newly assertive China in Asia.'⁹³ Former US National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon's has been of the view that 'Southeast Asia begins in Northeast India, and we welcome India's efforts to 'Look East', from supporting reforms in Myanmar to trilateral cooperation with Japan to promoting maritime security.'⁹⁴ In June 2017, President Trump in a joint statement with Prime Minister Modi described the alliance with India as 'democratic stalwarts in the Indo-Pacific region.'⁹⁵ India and the US are part of the Quad with Japan and Australia. These countries, owing to their 'maritime commons in the Indo-Pacific', are trying to engender a 'new regional architecture.'⁹⁶ The Quad's first ministerial meeting was held in September 2019 in New York. The meeting discussed cooperation on 'counterterrorism, mentoring assistance in disaster relief, airspace security and cyber security efforts.'⁹⁷

The China-India competition and foreign policy outlook involves the role of third parties as well. According to British historian Geoffrey Till:

Neither China nor India see each other as their primary antagonist but do note that they are allied to the countries that are – the US and Pakistan, respectively.⁹⁸

⁹³ Gupta, "India's Approach to the Asia-Pacific," 216-218.

⁹⁴ Muhammad Shafiq, "Emerging Trends in Geo-politics of Asia Pacific Region," *IPRI Journal XIV*, no.1 (Winter 2014): 81-101 (93), <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Article-no.5-Mohd-Shafiq.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Jaishankar, *Acting East*, 14.

⁹⁶ Bharath Gopaldaswamy, "India's Role and China's Roads in the Indo-Pacific: Looking East and South, New Delhi's Attention is Finally Turning to Southeast Asia," *Diplomat*, February 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/indias-role-and-chinas-roads-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁹⁷ Sriram Lakshman, "Quad's Significance Rises as Ministers Meet," *Hindu*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/quads-significance-rises-as-ministers-meet/article29527469.ece>.

⁹⁸ Bajpae, "China-India Regional Dimensions of the Bilateral Relations," 116.

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India and China, through alliance structures and bilateral ties, have reinforced ingress in each other's respective regions. India has developed relations with 'China's traditional regional adversaries – Vietnam and Japan.' A similar trend is seen in China's ties with countries of the IOR. President Xi Jinping visited India in September 2014, and also interacted with leadership of Sri Lanka and Maldives. Likewise, Narendra Modi's visited China, South Korea and Mongolia in May 2015.⁹⁹

Response from Regional Quarters

When confronted by a major external security challenge, a state may either balance by allying itself with other states against the potential threat or get on the band-wagon by aligning itself with the emergent power.¹⁰⁰

India's future *engagement* with the countries of Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and Oceania will largely be determined by the 'security dynamics' and 'geopolitical convergences'.¹⁰¹ China's political standing in Asia-Pacific and beyond cannot be underestimated. The China-ASEAN trade (USD 380 billion),¹⁰² Regional Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP),¹⁰³ and the BRI¹⁰⁴ are reflective of the country's economic strength and global outreach. No doubt, China's economic growth is an attraction for regional countries, but Jusuf Wanandi observes that 'China will always be seen as posing a threat to

⁹⁹ Bajpae, "China-India Regional Dimensions of the Bilateral Relations," 117.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), quoted in Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: Quo Vadis in 2017," *Pacific Focus* 33, no. 2 (August 2018): 179-208 (181), <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12115>.

¹⁰¹ Arvind Kumar, "Challenges to the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture: Emerging Role for India," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 9, no.2 (April-June 2014): 127-131 (134), <http://www.associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Vol9/9.2/9.2-DEBATE.pdf>.

¹⁰² Jassal and Gahlot, "India as a Rising Power in the Asia Pacific – The Success and the Challenges."

¹⁰³ Gopaldaswamy, "India's Role and China's Roads in the Indo-Pacific."

¹⁰⁴ Hassan Dawood Butt, "From Geo-Strategic to Geo-Economic Advantage," in *CPEC- A Precursor to Regional Economic Growth and Stability*, ed. Zafar Iqbal Cheema, (Islamabad: Strategic Vision Institute, 2019), 26.

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Southeast Asia, in view of its size and past experiences in which China considered Southeast Asia as within her sphere of influence.¹⁰⁵ Here it needs to be understood that power not always symbolises use of force, rather, economic intervention can be a manipulating tool. An economically strong country will maintain a huge military, thus, economic strength translates into political power. Thereby, since China's economic might is an actual force, regional countries, through alliance formations, are preparing against any potential threats.¹⁰⁶

The conduct of naval exercises by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in the South China Sea could be worrisome for the other littoral states.¹⁰⁷ This is a practical manifestation of neorealist paradigm, wherein the 'security dilemma' engendered by one player's power 'to enhance its own security decreases the security of other states.'¹⁰⁸ In the words of Kenneth Waltz 'it is unwise for states to try to maximize their share of world power, because the system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much power.'¹⁰⁹

China's military preponderance was bound to generate unease in regional and neighbouring countries. The 'threatened states' in order to dilute their apprehensions and to ensure that they do not become subservient to the powerful will try to strengthen their military muscle,¹¹⁰ and ally with other 'like-minded' countries.¹¹¹ In this struggle, the aim is to outmaneuver the strong player, and in the process military cum economic and security tools

¹⁰⁵ Aileen S. P. Baviera, "China's Relations with Southeast Asia: Political Security and Economic Interests" (paper, PASCN Discussion Paper No. 99-17, Philippine APEC Study Center Network, Philippines, 1999), 8,

<https://pascn.pids.gov.ph/files/Discussions%20Papers/1999/pascndp9917.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 1997: 931–935 (933), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952177>.

¹⁰⁷ Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia," 183.

¹⁰⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 75.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹¹¹ Panda, "India's Continental Connect on Indo-Pacific and Quad 2.0."

are employed. States, under the garb of regional cooperation, try to justify their cooperative endeavours. In Asia-Pacific, regional countries, despite being part of an economically vibrant region have aligned themselves with outside powers. Australia, Japan and ASEAN countries have defence ties with the US and India. This shows that the regional countries interest entirely does not revolve around economics (or more specifically China) rather defence and security continue to be the defining trends in regional power politics. The Quad having Japan, Australia, India, and the US as members is an example of cooperation between regional and foreign navies, amidst piracy, counter terrorism challenges and secure maritime environment. China's exclusion from Quad indicates that regional countries do not support its larger regional role and a sense of insecurity exists due to its naval posture.

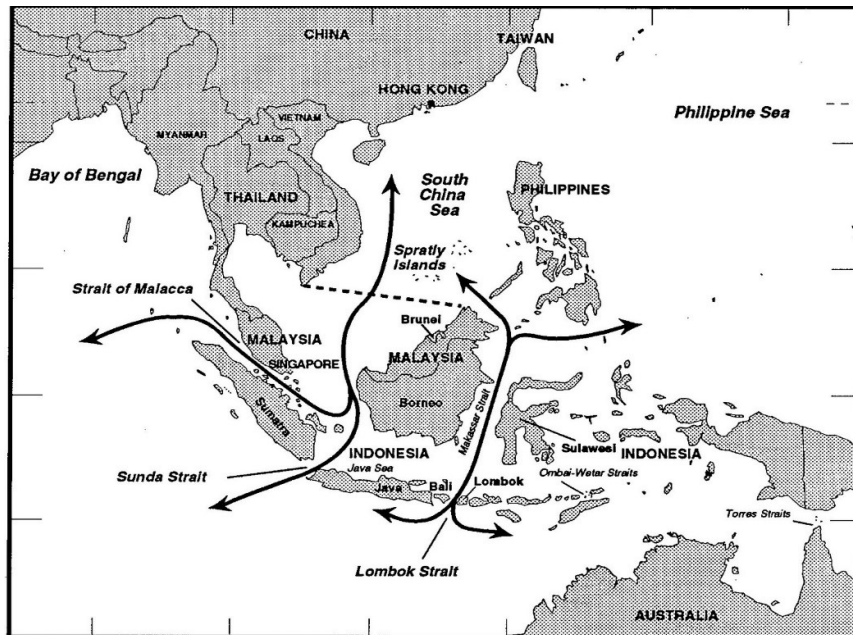
Conclusion

According to Mearsheimer, a state's ultimate goal is power, expansionism and survival.¹¹² The formation of alliance structures, political maneuvering and developing economic links are efforts to survive and adjust with a changing political order. India's inroads into Asia-Pacific from the early 1990s to the present have evolved from diplomatic and economic overtures to military and security cooperation. This speaks of New Delhi's future geopolitical orientation and trans-regional aspirations. Currently, it has institutional as well as bilateral ingress in Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, regional developments, as evidenced from China's naval build-up, have aroused competitive tendencies and unease among the littoral states. At the same time, India is trying to strengthen its maritime and security muscle in order to remain relevant for the region and to balance Beijing's growing regional dominance.

¹¹² Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," 74-75.

Annex-1

Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), Southeast Asia



Source: John H. Noer, "Strategic Chokepoints: Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok, and SLOCs Passing the Spratly Islands," in *Chokepoints: Maritime Economic Concerns in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: National Defence University Press, 1996).

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Annex-2

India's Trade Passages through Malacca Straits



Source: "Straits of Malacca & Bay of Bengal – Naturally Evolving US-India Relationship-II," *Macro Viewpoints*, January 19, 2019, <http://cinemasarik.com/2019/01/straits-of-malacca-bay-of-bengal-naturally-evolving-us-india-relationship-ii/>.

Annex-3

Andaman and Nicobar Islands



Source: Naman Chakraborty, “When did Andaman and Nicobar Islands Become Part of India?” Quora, July 14, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/When-did-Andaman-and-Nicobar-islands-become-part-of-India>.

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Annex-4

China's Naval Presence in Asia-Pacific



Source: Priom Islam, "The World's Busiest Hot Mess: Why the Asia-Pacific Region Will Be a Major Trouble Spot in the Future," *Odyssey*, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/worlds-busiest-hot-mess>. ■