



A STUDY ON INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: LOOKING WEST WHILE ACTING EAST

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Abstract

The expansion of geopolitical space and the connection between the two seas have led to concerns about the potential revival of Cold War-era containment strategies, including China, and the reemergence of power dynamics among Southeast Asian nations. India has emerged as a source of assistance for these countries, despite facing diplomatic opposition from China during its original presentation in 2007. The concept fell into stasis after George W. Bush and Shinzo Abe left office, but India still required adjustments to its posture. In recent years, Australia and China have altered their positions, but India still requires adjustments. Canberra has become a willing advocate due to China's increasing influence on Australian civil society and government, while Beijing is less concerned due to its growing influence over the last decade. New Delhi has always shown a strong desire to create a substantial distinction between the concept of the Indo-Pacific and the institutional structure known as the Quad. Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the need for inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific area, stating that it is not a strategy or an exclusive group, and that a geographical definition does not exist as an independent entity. India's inclusion of the phrase "inclusive" in the Japanese concept of "free and open Indo-Pacific" has been acknowledged by both Washington and Tokyo, indicating India's crucial position in the area. A Japanese academic noted that Modi's allusions to inclusivity pertain to the incorporation of China. In the light of the above background the present paper discussed Indian foreign policy on look East and Act west strategies in the Indo-Pacific region through the perspectives of realistic sense.

Keywords: *Quad, Indo-Pacific Region, Geo-politics, ASEAN, Look East, Act West.*

Introduction

For some time now, Southeast Asian nations have been worried that ASEAN might lose its position as the region's political and economic powerhouse due to the reconvened quadrilateral security dialogue (the Quad) between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and the re-emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a viable strategic concept in 2017.^[1] The expansion of geopolitical space and the conceptual linkage of the two oceans were inevitable consequences of this trend. In addition, four significant democratic powers in an area predominantly inhabited by one-party governments and dictatorial regimes brought to light the possibility of ulterior motives beyond simply containing China. This was a point that the original proponents of the Quad in Washington had made in 2007. Lastly, incorporating the Quad into the Indo-Pacific framework sparked concerns about a possible resurgence of Cold War-style containment—this time involving China—and the ugly return of major-power politics to Southeast Asia.^[2]

India is an unexpected source of support for Southeast Asian nations even though these concerns are genuine and call for a response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. When the Quad was initially presented in 2007, diplomatic criticism from China prompted India and Australia to scale back their promises, and the idea slipped into stagnation when George W. Bush and Shinzo Abe subsequently departed office. By the time the Quad came back around ten years later, Australia and



China had shifted their stances, but India still needed to modify its position. Canberra is now an eager supporter, which may be attributed to China's expanding efforts to influence Australian civil society and government. On the other hand, Beijing is less worried about the situation since its authority has expanded by leaps and bounds over the intervening decade. Nevertheless, New Delhi has always been eager to establish a significant barrier between the idea of the Indo-Pacific and the institutional framework that is the Quad. This has been the case from the beginning of time.^[3]

For instance, it was instructive to note that India's official statement after the historic Manila meeting in November 2017 differed significantly from the statements of the other three powers regarding freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and maritime security. This is even though these issues have been emphasised in bilateral and trilateral statements from India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the significance of the Indo-Pacific being an inclusive region when he spoke at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, saying, "India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor is the capacity of a group that works for dominance. Furthermore, we do not in any way believe it to be geared at any one nation. There is no such thing as a geographical definition in and of itself."^[4] The message was unmistakable to spectators all around the area. India's addition of the term "inclusive" to the Japanese formulation of "free and open Indo-Pacific" is now accepted by both Washington and Tokyo, if nothing else, signalling India's pivotal role in the region.^[5] A Japanese scholar observed that "Modi's references to inclusiveness mean the inclusion of China."^[6]

A Strategy for India's Indo-Pacific Region

How is it possible that a democratic big state that has been involved in a border dispute with China for a long time, that is fighting with China for geopolitical dominance in Asia, and Western countries are courting that as a bulwark against Chinese expansionism would pick an interpretation of the Indo-Pacific region that is favourable to China? The rationale underpinning India's inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific region may be derived from India's grand strategy and reasoning to establish its sense of security.

In general terms, India has three primary strategic goals it wants to accomplish. The first is domestic, to ensure that the Indian economy continues to expand in a manner that improves the lives of the 224 million Indians who are currently living in poverty.^[7] In order to accomplish this objective, an enormous amount of development finance will need to be directed towards the construction and maintenance of economic and social infrastructure, and a significant improvement in the state's capacity will be required over the long term. The second purpose of India is to prevent Pakistan and China, two strong and nuclear-armed regional competitors, from posing substantial threats to India's security and territorial integrity. Pakistan and China have a long history of working together, and India wants to prevent them from doing so. For the sake of accomplishing this objective, and because India's indigenous defence industry base is lacking, the country has made significant investments in enhancing its military capabilities via imports. Between the years 2009 and 2015, India was the biggest importer of military equipment in the world on an annual basis. In 2016, Saudi Arabia surpassed India in this regard.^[8] India's third and last purpose is to guarantee peace and stability in Asia. In this case, the motivation is not just security but also, and this is more essential, economic. Because maritime lanes account for 95% of India's commerce in terms of volume and 68% of its trade in terms of value, the region between the Arabian maritime and the East China Sea is considered significant geo-economic significance to New Delhi.^[9]



In light of these broad national goals, India has increasingly found that the sensible decision is to depend on the comparative advantage that the West has in terms of military force and the East possesses in terms of economic vigour. Although Russia has been a longtime supplier of military equipment to India since the Cold War, its share of India's total defence imports has decreased from 65 per cent in 1991 to 56 per cent in 2017. This is in contrast to the United States and its allies, whose share of India's defence imports has increased from 34 per cent to 43 per cent during the same period.^[10] At the same time, China's share of India's global trade has increased from 0.2 per cent in 1991 to 11.4 per cent in 2017 (and rising to almost 15 per cent if Hong Kong is taken into account). Today, China is India's most important commercial partner.^[11] India's economic imperative assures that it cannot afford to alienate China, and India's security imperative (related to China and Pakistan) ensures that it will continue to develop its connections with the United States.^[12] China is India's most significant trading partner. Another obstacle New Delhi must contend with is the possibility that minor skirmishes and standoffs along the Sino-Indian border might escalate into a military clash. This kind of scenario, brought vividly to life by the seventy-three-day standoff between the Chinese and Indian militaries at Doklam in the middle of 2017, gives Indian strategists pause. They want to avoid antagonising China, but they want to manage China's rise to benefit India without compromising India's sovereignty or national interests. India is likely to apply the brakes if the Indo-Pacific region and the related institutional frameworks begin to take form as a containment tactic.

Apart from its long-standing strategic goals, India is confronted with a dynamic challenge from China in the shape of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative has expanded throughout South Asia through substantial infrastructure loans to India's neighbours, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal. India is facing this challenge in addition to its long-standing strategic goals. The amount of non-economic influence China can purchase in this fashion is debatable. This includes influence in the areas of foreign policy and security. Chinese development finance has not delivered feasible projects due to a mix of ambiguous terms, corruption, and ineffective implementation; as a result, local economies have protested the level of Chinese control and involvement. Indian decision-makers are worried about the increasing strategic competition in South Asia that the BRI draws them into. While delivering his address at Shangri-La, Prime Minister Narendra Modi clarified that infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region "must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability, and sustainability." He further stated, "They must promote trade, not strategic competition."^[13] Since there is no assurance that Beijing will agree to these requirements, Indian strategic planners are forced to develop new economic strategies to fight for regional dominance. Cooperation with other Indo-Pacific powers has become necessary due to the inability of any significant power to match Beijing's considerable resources. This includes the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, launched in 2017 by India and Japan,^[14] and Washington's recently declared intention of creating a development fund to counter the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that will be worth sixty billion dollars.^[15]

It is hardly surprising that India has chosen inclusivity over containment in the Indo-Pacific, given its domestic challenges. Modi has stated that India envisions the region as "a positive one" with six pillars: connectivity, equal access to commons, trade liberalisation, inclusivity, the centrality of ASEAN, a rules-based order, and trade liberalisation. A careful balancing act becomes apparent when all six pillars are considered simultaneously. While other countries in the region want the Indo-Pacific to stay away from Cold War-style power politics, this plan gives it what it wants: a rules-based order, equal access to commons, and connectivity—a nod to the other Quad members—while also focusing on inclusivity (i.e., engaging China), ASEAN's centrality, and trade liberalisation.



Compared to the U.S., Japan, and Australia, India stands out in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. worries about China's influence in the region, the possibility of losing strategic importance to Japan, and existential security concerns related to territorial disputes with China. On the other hand, Australia is worried about Chinese influence infiltrating Australian society and the erosion of U.S. dominance in Asia. Not only does India have a significant military alliance and strategic collaboration with Russia, which makes it challenging to manage ties with the United States of America,^[16] but it also aims to engage China on concerns of regional order while also maintaining its tough stance in the case of a security crisis involving Beijing. In a more tangible sense, this has meant that New Delhi's Indo-Pacific policy has been carefully calibrated to work with the other members of the Quad, but not to the level that it may annoy Beijing. For example, India has routinely rejected Australia's requests to participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise. Since 2015, the Malabar exercise has included participation from the warships of India, the United States of America, and Japan. This most recent refusal by New Delhi came from Modi's highly publicised meeting with Xi Jinping at Wuhan in April 2018. This meeting was seen as finally defusing the tensions surrounding the Doklam crisis of 2017, and it was one of the factors that contributed to a U.S. analyst calling India "the weakest link in the Quad."^[17]

From India's Perspective: Southeast Asia's Role

In contrast to India's actions, which are often directed towards Eastern viewers, particularly those in Southeast Asia, India's declarations on the Indo-Pacific region are frequently produced to appeal to Western audiences. Ultimately, the Act East Policy has been India's principal means of interacting with the Indo-Pacific outside of the U.S. and Australia since its establishment in 1991, emphasising Southeast Asia and, more lately, Japan and South Korea. Modi and his senior ministers of defence and foreign affairs have often used the terms "the heart" and "the central pillar" to describe Southeast Asia within this policy.

Southeast Asia is reasonable to consider the geographic core of the Indo-Pacific region from a geopolitical perspective. An essential benefit is that India can pursue its goal of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region when it emphasises the importance of ASEAN. There may be few better ways to minimise the potentially hazardous character of this new strategic idea — to both China and the Southeast Asian States — than to offer its membership to all of the governments in the area. This permits India to continue playing the role of a "swing state"^[18] in the region and, as a result, pursue its grand strategic aims flexibly. This is made possible by diluting the power of the United States and its allies in this manner. The pursuit of "maximum options" in international relations to "enhance India's strategic space and capacity for independent agency — which in turn will give it maximum options for its internal development" is what led to this approach, which is essentially the outcome of India's steadfast adherence to a foreign policy of strategic autonomy.^[19] Strategic autonomy fits India's grand objectives of fostering economic development while fending off threats from Pakistan and China and contributing to a peaceful and stable continent. On the one hand, it enables India to spread the risk of interacting with the United States and its allies. At the same time, on the other side, there is the possibility of engaging with China and Russia.

Concurrently, India stands to gain a great deal from economic interaction with Southeast Asia, which has been a recurrent theme throughout the Look East and Act East strategies since the early 1990s. This engagement has been a persistent theme. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries have been asked to assist in developing northeastern India, an area with significant cultural and historical links to the Mekong region. India has also attempted to increase the amount of foreign direct investment from



ASEAN member-states. The Free Commerce Agreement between India and ASEAN, carefully negotiated and ratified in 2010, considerably increased India's commerce with the area. This increase almost doubled between 2009 and 2017, and ASEAN now accounts for approximately 11 per cent of India's total trade. ^[20]

The broader political and security relationship that ought to have existed between India and Southeast Asia was absent from this picture until quite recently. The administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has filled this void via frantic diplomacy and optimistic propaganda. For instance, India and Singapore have strengthened their long-standing defence relationship by signing a defence cooperation agreement in 2015, holding a dialogue between defence ministers in 2016, reaching an access agreement with Changi Naval Base in 2017, and signing a naval logistics agreement in 2018. ^[21] Similarly, India's state-owned oil company ONGC Videsh is currently engaged in offshore drilling in Vietnam's waters in the South China Sea. Additionally, India has provided Vietnam.

On the diplomatic front, Modi has been to all but two ASEAN nations since he became prime minister in 2014. The only countries he has yet to visit are Cambodia and Brunei. In January 2018, Modi welcomed all ten ASEAN heads of state during India's annual Republic Day parade, which was a historic event. Previous administrations in India have yet to devote a comparable amount of attention to the symbolic level of raising India's connections with ASEAN. For instance, after Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was invited to attend Republic Day in 1994 as the chief guest, it took another seventeen years for another Southeast Asian head of state, President Yudhoyono of Indonesia, to be invited in the same capacity. Although some people consider Modi's diplomacy to be nothing more than a matter of theatre, India's efforts to build political relations with Southeast Asia have arguably demonstrated New Delhi's willingness to at least diplomatically support countries that are at the forefront of China's rise. In this way, India has played the role that former Indian foreign secretary S. Jaishankar has made statement.

Looking Forward

When considering India's perspective on and involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, it is evident that Southeast Asia benefits from significant strategic advantages. Through its determination to deepen economic connections with the region, New Delhi provides ASEAN member states an entrance point into a significant market, expanding trade and investment opportunities. Some worries about possible counterweights to Chinese influence are alleviated due to the aggressive diplomacy that the Modi administration is doing in the area. On the other hand, India's Indo-Pacific policy, which is, in fact, its grand strategy as a whole, is plagued by a significant internal conflict that can potentially limit the likelihood of a severe security commitment to Southeast Asia.

It would be more difficult for India to adhere to a strategy of strategic autonomy while also harbouring hopes of becoming a great power. This is the problem with the paradox. Assuming the role of a great power requires taking a stance on various issues throughout the globe and interfering decisively to preserve order. Until recently, the United States of America was alone responsible for fulfilling this function in Southeast Asia. It did so by ensuring its partners and friends that its immense military might prevent significant challenges to their safety and prosperity. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) flourished under this protective cover, but it is looking for other security guarantors in today's more multipolar and unstable world.



On the other hand, India cannot only assist the United States in practical matters but is also reluctant to do so regarding doctrine. This is because the United States faces an increasingly difficult challenge of sustaining regional order due to China's rising might and aggressiveness.

Furthermore, the same is likely valid for Japan and Australia. This is precisely why many experts in Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra regard the Quad as a first step towards aggregating assets and coordinating strategy with India to discourage China. More specifically, they hope to see the Quad. Fortuitously for them, India is not an ally of the United States, and it will continue to resist becoming one for as long as it can benefit materially from Washington's military and economic largesse without making a significant commitment. New Delhi's commitment to the Quad has been entirely rhetorical up until this point.

Given the current situation, two futures are possible: first, crises compel India to assert its power in the Indo-Pacific region; second, India becomes even more reclusive as the U.S. and its allies drastically reduce their readiness to fund its ascent perpetually. It is indisputable that Southeast Asia would benefit more from one of these scenarios. Since this is the case, it is incumbent upon the leaders of the area to make an effort to mould India's ascent in ways that would result in that end.

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