



# STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES OF INDIA IN THE INDO- PACIFIC REGION: BALANCING SECURITY, CONNECTIVITY AND GREAT POWER RIVALRY

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**Abstract:** Over a period of time, the Indo-Pacific region has become the hub of 21<sup>st</sup> century so far as geopolitical and geostrategic competition is concerned. By articulating the MAHASAGAR initiative, which is a successor to the earlier SAGAR doctrine, India has been focusing the objective of Soft-Power diplomacy with a particular emphasis on the global south. Reframing its role through Act- East, SAGAR, IORA, QUAD and along with prime focus on blue economy and supply chain resilience to a great extent. Notably, about 77 per cent of the world population resides in the “Indo-Pacific region” (Bhatia & Sakhuja, 2014). The role of social constructivism theory as a contemporary international relations (IR) theory has been taken very prominent place with respect to multiple ideas, interactions, premonitions, norms, assumptions and so on. Institutional frameworks and inter- state operations have been orchestrated by reinforcing naval access and competitive deployments of naval forces. The ‘ASEAN Way’ and the role of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) have been relied firmly on consensus, non-confrontational approaches and non- interference in domestic affairs and most significantly on multilateralism. From the ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’ to the Rules- based order and the implications for the Indo- Pacific region, being observed through various lenses including realist, neo-realist, and constructivist. This region has portrayed as a new upsurge for the strategic polices, international systems, regional forums and so on.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Act-East, Social Constructivism, Global South, IR theory and QUAD

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## 1. Introduction

At the 21<sup>st</sup> Asia Security Summit of the IISS Shangri- La Dialogue which was held in 2024, panellists from different countries have opined how the green

transition is leading great powers and middle powers alike to pursue industrial policies to maximise their economic security and to invest capital in supply chain resilience and blue economy. <sup>1</sup>Since the post-cold war the USA has been the most dominant naval power globally, including in the Indian Ocean region. There is a clear growing maritime intent from great powers particularly USA and China in which India as a developing country has been following equal distance from both the great powers by reinvigorating Non-Alignment NAM to strategic alignment for accomplishing its national interest at the international level. India's bolstered maritime approach to regional waters such as the Theatre-level Readiness and Operational Exercises (TROPEX) and Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) maritime exercises. <sup>2</sup>Indo-Pacific as a term constructs the image of the region, aspires the new avenues, norms, ideas and inter-subjective awareness to a great extent. The role of India in capability development measures <sup>3</sup> in the Indian Ocean Region through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which is primarily a regional organisation and has been established to answer the needs of the maritime security in the region. The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the new global centre of gravity, where geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests of major powers intersect. For India, the region is both an opportunity and a challenge. As Asia's third-largest economy and a rising power, India aims to secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs), maintain a stable regional order, and manage great-power rivalry—particularly between the United States and China—without compromising its strategic autonomy. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is shaped by its civilizational ties, economic dependence on maritime trade, security interests, and long-term vision of a free, open, and multipolar region. The Indo-Pacific region—stretching conceptually from the eastern shores of Africa to the western coastline of the Americas—has become the core of global geopolitical competition. Home to over half the world's population and accounting for more than 60% of global GDP, the Indo-Pacific hosts critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs), energy corridors, and major chokepoints that underpin global trade <sup>4</sup> (Brewster, 2021). For India, the Indo-Pacific represents a strategic continuum that intersects its maritime, economic, and geopolitical interests. India's "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" (IPOI), its articulation of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, and its growing network of strategic partnerships reflect Delhi's intent to shape regional developments (MEA, 2019).

As strategic rivalry intensifies between China and the United States, India faces the challenge of navigating a competitive environment while

safeguarding its national interests. The Indo-Pacific is both an opportunity—allowing India to project influence and strengthen partnerships—and a domain of challenge, shaped by China’s assertiveness, regional instability, and fragile multilateral frameworks. Against this backdrop, India seeks to balance security imperatives with the necessity of maintaining strategic autonomy and avoiding entanglement in great-power confrontations.

## **2. India’s Strategic Imperatives In The Indo-Pacific**

### ***(a) Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation***

Maritime security constitutes the cornerstone of India’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Approximately 95% of India’s trade by volume and nearly 70% by value transits through maritime routes (Indian Navy, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, India relies heavily on energy imports from the Middle East, making secure SLOCs critical for national well-being.

India faces a wide spectrum of maritime challenges, including piracy in the Gulf of Aden, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and vulnerabilities arising from natural disasters. The Indian Navy’s sustained anti-piracy patrols, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions, and growing blue-water capabilities signal its aspiration to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Pant & Singh, 2022)<sup>6</sup>.

India’s focus on maritime domain awareness (MDA) is reflected in initiatives such as the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which facilitates information sharing with partner states (IFC-IOR, 2021). Through Mission SAGAR and HADR operations, India also provides humanitarian support to island nations, reinforcing its image as a reliable regional first responder (MEA, 2020).

India’s maritime strategy has evolved significantly—from a continental focus to a balanced land-sea outlook. The Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) and Ensuring Secure Seas (2015) highlight the following pillars:

### ***(b) Securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)***

- Over 90% of India’s trade by volume and ~75% by value moves through sea routes.
- Ensuring the safety of SLOCs through the Indian Ocean and beyond is critical for India’s economic lifelines, particularly for energy flows from the Persian Gulf and Africa.

### *(c) Safeguarding India's Maritime Zones*

- India has substantial assets spread across its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and island territories (Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep).
- The strategy prioritizes coastal security, anti-piracy patrols, and developing maritime domain awareness.

### *(d) Navy Modernization and Power Projection*

India is transitioning from a brown-water to a blue-water navy capable of sustained operations in the wider Indo-Pacific. Key elements include:

- Aircraft carriers (INS Vikrant, INS Vikramaditya)
- Nuclear submarines (Arihant-class)
- Long-range maritime surveillance (P-8I aircraft)
- Strengthened logistics through agreements like LEMOA with the US, access to Japanese and Australian ports, etc.

### *(e) Multilateral and Minilateral Engagements*

India's maritime strategy leverages diplomacy through:

- Quad (India-US-Japan-Australia)
- Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)
- ASEAN-led frameworks
- Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)

These platforms strengthen cooperative security, disaster response, and rule-based maritime order.

"Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR)

Introduced in 2015, SAGAR emphasizes:

- Collective security
- Regional prosperity
- Capacity-building for smaller island nations
- Freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution

## **3. Responding to China's Expanding Influence**

China's rise is the most consequential strategic development for India in the Indo-Pacific. China's military modernization, naval expansion, and assertive behaviour in the South China Sea—combined with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—have created structural challenges for India.

### ***(a) The China Factor in the Indian Ocean***

China's investments in ports across the Indian Ocean, including Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti, have raised concerns over dual-use facilities that could support future People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operations (Singh, 2021). The "String of Pearls" strategy, though unofficial, reflects India's perception of potential strategic encirclement.

### ***(b) Border Tensions and Strategic Competition***

The 2020 border crisis in Ladakh strained India–China relations and underscored the limits of bilateral diplomacy. The crisis accelerated India's efforts to diversify supply chains, reduce economic dependence, and deepen strategic partnerships with like-minded nations (Tellis, 2021).

### ***(c) Soft Balancing Through Multilateral Platforms***

India rejects formal alliances but favours issue-based partnerships. Initiatives such as the Quad—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—serve as instruments of soft balancing, focusing on defence exercises, supply chain resilience, emerging technologies, and maritime security (Mohan, 2021). India also cooperates with ASEAN, France, South Korea, and the United Kingdom to enhance its strategic reach.

## **4. Enhancing Economic Connectivity and Regional Integration**

Economic engagement forms another critical pillar of India's Indo-Pacific approach. The region offers opportunities for trade expansion, infrastructure development, and blue economy cooperation.

### ***(a) Act East Policy and ASEAN Engagement***

ASEAN remains central to India's Indo-Pacific vision. India prioritizes connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project to strengthen linkages with Southeast Asia (Haokip, 2020).

### ***(b) Supply Chain Diversification***

Amid concerns about overdependence on China for manufacturing and technology supply chains, India has joined multilateral economic frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), focusing

on trade, clean energy, supply chain resilience, and anti-corruption measures (White House, 2022).

### ***(c) Blue Economy Initiatives***

India emphasizes sustainable development of marine resources through initiatives under IPOI, such as maritime ecology, resource development, and disaster risk reduction (MEA, 2019).

Together, these efforts aim to embed India more deeply into regional value chains and enhance its strategic leverage.

## **5. Strategic Partnerships with Middle Powers**

India's Indo-Pacific strategy benefits from robust partnerships with middle powers that share common interests in maintaining a rules-based order.

### ***(a) Japan***

India–Japan cooperation encompasses infrastructure development, defence technology, and joint exercises. Japan's investments in India's northeast and collaboration on regional connectivity projects—such as in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—complement India's efforts to present an alternative to Chinese financing (Tanaka, 2020).

### ***(b) Australia***

Once cautious of aligning too closely with India, Australia has emerged as a key Indo-Pacific partner. Defence cooperation has expanded through the Quad, the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA), and joint maritime exercises (Medcalf, 2020).

### ***(c) France***

France is an Indo-Pacific power through its overseas territories, and it partners closely with India on maritime surveillance, naval cooperation, and regional capacity building. The India–France–UAE trilateral further strengthens security coordination (Lequesne, 2021).

### ***(d) Island Nations***

Partnerships with Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, and Sri Lanka are vital for India's regional influence. India supports capacity building, coastal radar

systems, and developmental assistance, reinforcing its role as a “preferred security partner” (Pant & Sahoo, 2019).

## **6. Upholding A Rules-Based Order and Multilateral Diplomacy**

India champions a multipolar, inclusive Indo-Pacific grounded in international law—particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Rather than viewing the region through a containment lens, India emphasizes cooperation.

### ***(a) ASEAN Centrality***

India supports ASEAN centrality through platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) dialogues, even though it opted out of RCEP itself (Haokip, 2020).

### ***(b) Indian Ocean Institutions***

India actively engages with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). These multilateral forums facilitate collective security, economic cooperation, and environmental management (Brewster, 2021).

### ***(c) Normative Diplomacy***

India’s Indo-Pacific discourse stresses openness, inclusivity, and non-coercive maritime behaviour—positions that contrast with China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea (Mohan, 2021). Through IPOI, India offers a normative framework that aligns with international law and regional stability.

## **7. Balancing Security and Great Power Rivalry**

India’s Indo-Pacific strategy is shaped by its need to balance between great powers while safeguarding sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

### ***(a) Strategic Autonomy and Flexible Alignment***

Strategic autonomy remains central to India’s foreign policy. Although India cooperates increasingly with the United States, it avoids formal alliances and maintains diversified relations with Russia, Southeast Asian countries, and West Asian powers (Pant & Singh, 2022).

India's balancing act involves:

- cooperating with the U.S. and its allies on maritime security and emerging technologies,
- managing a complex but necessary economic relationship with China,
- retaining long-standing defense ties with Russia,
- fostering regional partnerships independent of major-power rivalry.

This flexible alignment enables India to optimize partnerships without sacrificing independence.

### ***(b) Defence Modernization and Capacity Building***

India recognizes that its strategic ambitions must be supported by military capabilities. The Indian Navy is undergoing modernization aimed at fleet expansion, including aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, anti-submarine warfare assets, and long-range aircraft (Indian Navy, 2020).

Other measures include:

- strengthening the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC),
- expanding coastal security infrastructure,
- increasing joint exercises such as Malabar and Milan,
- enhancing interoperability with partner navies.

These efforts aim to bolster deterrence and ensure rapid response to regional contingencies.

### ***(c) Soft-Power Diplomacy as a Strategic Asset***

India leverages soft power—including cultural connections, diaspora networks, and developmental assistance—to advance its Indo-Pacific goals.

Examples include:

- Lines of credit and grant assistance in South Asia and Africa,
- Digital capacity support under India–ASEAN initiatives,
- Cultural diplomacy through Buddhism and historical maritime linkages (Haokip, 2020).

Soft-power diplomacy amplifies India's influence without triggering security anxieties among smaller states.

## **8. Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Despite its proactive strategy, India faces several constraints:

### ***(a) Resource and Capability Limitations***

India's defence budget and naval modernization pace lag behind China's massive military expansion (Tellis, 2021)<sup>7</sup>. Large-scale infrastructure development and connectivity projects also strain India's financial resources.

### ***(b) Continental Pressures***

India must simultaneously manage security concerns along its land borders with Pakistan and China. The possibility of a two-front conflict diverts military resources away from maritime priorities (Singh, 2021).

### ***(c) Divergent Interests Within ASEAN***

ASEAN countries have varying responses to China's rise, making cohesive regional action difficult. India's strategic outreach is therefore complicated by internal ASEAN divisions<sup>8</sup> (Tanaka, 2020).

### ***(d) Strategic Uncertainty in Great-Power Relations***

Unpredictability in U.S. foreign policy, combined with China's growing assertiveness, creates a volatile environment. India must continuously recalibrate its diplomatic posture to avoid entrapment in great-power competition.

### ***(e) Dependence on External Technology***

India remains dependent on foreign suppliers for critical defence technologies, limiting its strategic autonomy in the security domain (Pant & Singh, 2022).

## **9. Conclusion**

India's strategic imperatives in the Indo-Pacific are defined by the need to secure maritime interests, respond to China's expanding influence, deepen economic and connectivity linkages, strengthen relations with middle powers, and uphold a rules-based regional order. As great-power competition intensifies, India's challenge is to maintain strategic autonomy while enhancing its security posture and engagement. India is likely to continue pursuing a multi-aligned, inclusive approach—neither joining a military alliance nor remaining passive in the face of regional instability. The Indo-Pacific will remain the central theatre for India's geopolitical ambitions, and its ability to navigate complex strategic rivalries will shape the future of regional order. A stable, multipolar

Indo-Pacific will depend not only on India's choices but also on the evolving relationship among major powers and regional stakeholders. The Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographic space but a strategically interconnected maritime system linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single continuum. The two oceans are bound together by shared trade routes, security challenges, and geopolitical dynamics, making the Indo-Pacific a unified strategic theatre.

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