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India's Indo-Pacific Strategy under the Changing Global Order

Sham Nivrutti Gulve
Assistant Professor, Political Science, Maharashtra National Law University Mumbai

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific has become an important centre of global politics as the distribution of power continues to change and competition among major powers becomes more intense. The rise of China, growing US–China rivalry, maritime security concerns, economic uncertainties, and the growing importance of regional and minilateral partnerships have all influenced India's foreign-policy choices. This article examines how India's Indo-Pacific strategy has developed in response to these changes and how New Delhi seeks to balance strategic autonomy with its growing security, economic, and diplomatic engagement in the region. The study draws on Indian foreign-policy documents, official statements, strategic initiatives, and existing academic literature to examine the major dimensions of India's Indo-Pacific engagement, particularly maritime security, strategic partnerships, minilateral cooperation, economic connectivity, and regional institutions. The article argues that India's approach cannot be understood simply as an effort to balance China or align with the United States. Instead, India is seeking to expand its regional influence while retaining freedom of strategic choice. Its engagement with the Quad, ASEAN, the Indian Ocean region, and other regional partners reflects this approach. At the same time, limitations in defence capabilities, economic resources, trade integration, and institutional capacity constrain India's ability to translate its strategic ambitions into sustained regional influence. The article concludes that India's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a pragmatic combination of strategic autonomy, flexible partnerships, maritime engagement, and gradual efforts to influence the emerging regional order. This approach allows India to respond to the changing global environment while maintaining considerable independence in its foreign-policy choices.

***Keywords**: Indo-Pacific, India, Foreign Policy, China, Realism, Maritime Security, Regional Power.*

Introduction

The international system is going through a period of considerable change. The relative dominance of the United States that characterised the post-Cold War period is being challenged by the growing economic and military capabilities of other major powers. China's rise, continuing US–China competition, Russia's changing role, technological rivalry, economic uncertainty, and the increasing influence of emerging and middle powers are contributing to a more complex and less predictable global environment. Power is no longer concentrated in a single centre, and states are increasingly adjusting their foreign policies to deal with a combination of cooperation and competition. These changes are particularly visible in the Indo-Pacific, which has become one of the most important regions in contemporary international politics. The significance of the Indo-Pacific goes beyond its geographical boundaries. The region connects some of the world's most important trade routes, energy corridors, economic centres, and maritime spaces. It is also home to several major military powers and a large number of smaller states whose strategic choices can affect the regional balance. Competition over maritime access, infrastructure, technology, supply chains, and strategic influence has consequently increased. At the same time, the region does not operate through a single security arrangement or alliance system. Different countries have different interests and often cooperate with one another on some issues while competing on others. This makes the Indo-Pacific a particularly important setting for understanding how the regional and global order is changing. These developments have important implications for India. For much of the post-independence period, India's security concerns were primarily shaped by its continental neighbourhood, particularly its relations with Pakistan and China and the unresolved issues along its land borders.

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Address for correspondence:
Sham Nivrutti Gulve, Assistant Professor, Political Science, Maharashtra National Law University Mumbai

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Although the Indian Ocean has always been important to India's security and economic interests, maritime affairs did not receive the same strategic attention as continental security. This situation has gradually changed. India's growing dependence on maritime trade and energy supplies, the expansion of its economic interests in East and Southeast Asia, and the increasing presence of China in the Indian Ocean have encouraged New Delhi to give greater importance to the maritime domain and to develop a broader regional outlook. India's contemporary Indo-Pacific policy is therefore better understood as an evolution of its earlier foreign-policy priorities rather than as a complete break with the past. The Look East Policy, followed by the Act East Policy, provided the foundation for deeper engagement with Southeast and East Asia. Over time, these policies became increasingly connected with India's maritime interests and its wider strategic objectives. Initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) reflect this broader approach. India's engagement with ASEAN and other regional institutions further indicates that its understanding of the Indo-Pacific extends beyond military cooperation and includes connectivity, economic relations, capacity building, disaster relief, and maritime cooperation. At the same time, China's growing power has become a major consideration in India's Indo-Pacific strategy. China's economic expansion, military modernisation, infrastructure projects, and growing naval presence have changed the strategic environment surrounding India. China's increasing involvement in the Indian Ocean has been of particular concern to New Delhi. The deterioration of India–China relations and the border crisis of 2020 further strengthened India's assessment of the security challenge posed by China. In response, India has expanded defence and strategic cooperation with countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and other regional partners. However, India has stopped short of entering a formal alliance directed against China. This reflects an important feature of Indian foreign policy: the desire to strengthen external partnerships while retaining independent decision-making. The relationship between strategic autonomy and closer partnerships raises an important question about the nature of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. India's growing cooperation with the United States and other partners could be interpreted as a form of balancing against China. At the same time, India's reluctance to enter a formal alliance and its continued engagement with a wide range of countries suggest that its policy cannot be explained through balancing alone. The idea of strategic hedging also provides part of the explanation, but it does not fully capture India's efforts to influence regional institutions, maritime arrangements, connectivity initiatives, and emerging rules. This article therefore approaches India's Indo-Pacific policy from a broader perspective and asks whether India is gradually moving from simply responding to changes in the regional balance towards playing a more active role in shaping the regional order.

Existing studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of India's strategic autonomy, relations with China and the United States, maritime security policy, Quad participation, and engagement with ASEAN. However, these aspects are often examined independently. Studies focusing on China tend to emphasise the security dimension of India's Indo-Pacific policy, while research on the Quad often concentrates on India–US strategic cooperation. Other studies focus on India's maritime role or its commitment to a rules-based regional order. While each of these approaches provides valuable insights, there is scope for examining these developments together. In particular, greater attention is needed to the relationship between India's strategic autonomy, its growing network of partnerships, and its efforts to influence the emerging regional order.

This article addresses this gap by examining India's Indo-Pacific strategy as a broader and evolving approach to regional engagement. It argues that India's policy should not be understood simply as an attempt to contain or balance China, nor as a continuation of the traditional non-alignment approach. Instead, India is pursuing what may be described as **selective regional order-shaping**. Through strategic partnerships, minilateral arrangements, maritime cooperation, regional institutions, connectivity initiatives, and economic and technological engagement, India is attempting to increase its influence while retaining considerable freedom in its foreign-policy choices. This approach involves managing several objectives at the same time. India seeks to protect its strategic autonomy, respond to the growing power of China, strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean, deepen relations with major powers, and support a stable and predictable regional environment. These objectives are not always easy to reconcile. India's closer security relationship with the United States, for example, creates strategic opportunities but also raises questions about the future of its autonomy. Similarly, India's efforts to strengthen its position against China have to be balanced with the need to avoid unnecessary escalation. India's continued relationship with Russia adds another layer of complexity to this strategic calculation. India's emphasis on an open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific also forms an important part of this approach. Its support for ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation, international law, peaceful resolution of disputes, and greater cooperation among regional states reflects an attempt to promote a regional environment that does not depend solely on competition among major powers. At the same time, India's growing defence capabilities, maritime partnerships, information-sharing arrangements, and participation in minilateral groupings demonstrate that its regional policy is also shaped by practical security considerations. India's Indo-Pacific strategy can therefore be seen as a combination of strategic interests and normative preferences rather than as a purely military or purely diplomatic project.

The success of this strategy, however, cannot be assessed only in terms of India's diplomatic initiatives. India's ability to influence the Indo-Pacific will also depend on its economic, military, technological, and institutional

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capabilities. India has considerable advantages, including its geographical position, large economy, growing defence capabilities, expanding diplomatic partnerships, and its location at the centre of the Indian Ocean. Yet it also faces limitations in naval capacity, defence production, infrastructure, trade integration, technological capabilities, and the resources available for sustained regional engagement. The difference between India's growing strategic ambitions and its ability to support those ambitions with adequate capabilities represents an important issue for understanding the future of its Indo-Pacific policy. Against this background, the article addresses the central question: How has India's Indo-Pacific strategy evolved in response to the changing global order, and to what extent does it enable India to preserve strategic autonomy while responding to China's rise and seeking a greater role in shaping the regional order? It also examines whether India's behaviour is best explained through the concepts of balancing, hedging, strategic autonomy, or a combination of these approaches. The study adopts a qualitative approach and draws on Indian foreign-policy documents, official statements, policy initiatives, strategic partnership agreements, regional institutional documents, and relevant academic literature. The analysis focuses on five interconnected aspects of India's Indo-Pacific strategy: strategic autonomy, maritime security, minilateral cooperation, economic engagement, and regional institution-building. Rather than examining these areas separately, the article considers how they interact and contribute to India's wider strategic objectives. The article makes three main contributions. First, it contributes to the debate on strategic autonomy by showing that maintaining autonomy does not necessarily require India to keep its distance from major powers. India can deepen strategic cooperation while retaining the ability to make independent decisions. Second, the article brings together India's maritime, economic, institutional, and minilateral engagements to provide a broader understanding of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Third, it highlights the gap between India's ambitions and its material capabilities, arguing that the future effectiveness of India's regional strategy will depend significantly on its ability to convert diplomatic influence into sustained economic, technological, and military capacity.

The article proceeds as follows. The following section develops the theoretical framework, with particular attention to strategic autonomy and regional order-shaping. The methodology and sources used in the study are then discussed. Subsequent sections examine the evolution of India's Indo-Pacific policy, its major strategic drivers, and the principal instruments through which India engages the region. The article then assesses India's regional ambitions alongside the constraints and contradictions that affect their implementation. The conclusion considers what India's evolving strategy means for its position in the emerging Indo-Pacific and the wider transformation of the international order.

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Autonomy and Regional Order-Shaping

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is closely linked to its long-standing preference for maintaining strategic autonomy. However, the meaning of strategic autonomy has changed with the transformation of the international system. During the Cold War, India's non-alignment was largely based on keeping away from the military blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. The present situation is quite different. India now maintains close strategic relations with several major powers while continuing to make its own decisions on issues that it considers important to its national interests. Strategic autonomy, therefore, should not be seen as a policy of staying away from major powers. It is increasingly about having enough freedom to work with different countries without becoming dependent on any one of them. This change can be seen clearly in India's relationship with the United States. Defence cooperation, military exercises, technology partnerships and maritime coordination have grown considerably over the past two decades. India's participation in the Quad has added another important dimension to this relationship. Yet India has not accepted a formal alliance structure with the United States or any other power. It has also maintained important relationships with Russia, France, Iran, the Gulf countries, ASEAN members and other partners. Such a pattern of foreign-policy behaviour suggests that India is trying to expand its strategic options rather than choosing one fixed camp. Cooperation with one country does not necessarily mean accepting all of that country's strategic priorities.

The idea of regional order-shaping helps explain another important aspect of India's Indo-Pacific policy. Regional order is not determined only by the military strength of major powers. Institutions, economic relationships, diplomatic practices, norms and the ability to provide security and other public goods also influence how a region develops. India has increasingly attempted to contribute to these processes. Its support for an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, respect for international law, freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of disputes and ASEAN centrality reflects an effort to influence the principles on which the regional order is organised. India's objective, however, does not appear to be regional dominance. New Delhi has generally presented the Indo-Pacific as a region in which large and small countries should have the freedom to pursue their own interests. This is one reason why India's engagement with ASEAN remains important. India sees ASEAN not simply as another group of countries with which it has economic relations, but as an important part of the regional institutional structure. Its engagement with ASEAN-led mechanisms allows India to participate in regional affairs without reducing the Indo-Pacific to competition between China and the United States. This approach also complicates a simple interpretation of India as a balancing power against China. India's growing defence cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia, as well as its efforts to strengthen maritime capabilities, clearly have a balancing element. China's expanding military and economic presence has influenced these choices. At the same time, India has avoided making the containment of China the formal basis of its Indo-Pacific policy. It continues to engage China diplomatically and maintains relations with countries outside the US-

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led strategic network. The Indian approach therefore contains elements of balancing, hedging and strategic autonomy, but none of these concepts alone provides a complete explanation.

For the purpose of this study, strategic autonomy explains India's effort to maintain freedom of action, while regional order-shaping helps explain its broader ambition to influence the environment in which regional competition takes place. These two ideas are closely related. India requires strategic autonomy to work with different partners, while its growing partnerships provide the means through which it can exercise greater regional influence. The important question is whether India's material capabilities are sufficient to support these ambitions. Diplomatic influence cannot be sustained indefinitely without economic strength, military capacity, technological capability and institutional resources. This relationship between ambition and capability is therefore central to understanding India's role in the Indo-Pacific.

Evolution and Strategic Drivers of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's present Indo-Pacific strategy is the result of a gradual change in its foreign-policy outlook. The process began well before the Indo-Pacific became a commonly used strategic term. India's economic reforms and the Look East Policy in the 1990s created stronger links with Southeast Asia. These relations expanded further under the Act East Policy, which gave greater attention to political, strategic and security cooperation. India's engagement with ASEAN and countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand consequently moved beyond trade and included defence, connectivity and maritime cooperation. The Indo-Pacific concept brought these different strands of Indian policy into a broader framework. It encouraged New Delhi to view the Indian Ocean and the Pacific as interconnected strategic spaces rather than as separate regions. This was important for India because of its geographical position. The country sits close to major Indian Ocean Sea routes and depends heavily on the maritime domain for trade and energy supplies. At the same time, India's economic and political interests increasingly extend towards Southeast and East Asia. The Indo-Pacific therefore provides a framework through which India's continental, maritime and eastern interests can be considered together. The Indian Ocean remains particularly important in this strategy. India's geographical position gives it a natural interest in the security of the surrounding maritime space, but geography alone does not explain the country's growing maritime focus. India's economic development is closely connected with uninterrupted access to international shipping routes. Disruption in these routes can affect energy supplies, trade and wider economic activity. India's SAGAR vision reflects this wider understanding by linking maritime security with economic development, connectivity and cooperation with other countries in the region. The rise of China has added a much stronger strategic dimension to India's regional outlook. China's growing economic strength, military modernisation and expanding presence across the Indo-Pacific have changed the strategic balance in Asia. For India, China's activities in the Indian Ocean are particularly significant because they take place close to India's own maritime neighbourhood. China's relationships with countries in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, together with its infrastructure and port-related activities, have increased India's concern about the possibility of a wider Chinese strategic presence in the region. The situation became more serious after the India–China border crisis of 2020. The crisis reinforced the fact that India's continental and maritime security cannot be considered independently. Developments along the Himalayan border can affect India's wider strategic planning, while China's maritime position has implications for India's broader security calculations. This has encouraged India to strengthen both its military capabilities and its external partnerships.

The expansion of India's strategic relationship with the United States, Japan and Australia needs to be viewed in this context. Cooperation has increased in defence, maritime security, intelligence sharing, technology and military exercises. The Quad has become one of the most visible expressions of this cooperation. Importantly, however, its agenda has expanded beyond traditional military issues. Infrastructure, health security, critical technologies, climate change, disaster relief and supply-chain resilience have all become part of the wider discussion. This reflects the changing nature of strategic competition, where economic and technological capabilities are increasingly connected with national security. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is therefore driven by several factors at the same time. China is a major concern, but the strategy is also influenced by India's dependence on maritime trade, its desire for stronger relations with Southeast and East Asia, concerns about supply-chain vulnerability, technological competition and its aspiration to play a larger role in international affairs. These interests cannot be reduced to a single security objective. The economic side of the strategy, however, remains less developed than its security dimension. India has considerable economic potential and a large domestic market, but its trade and investment links with several Indo-Pacific countries are still below what might be expected from a country seeking a larger regional role. China's much greater economic presence creates an additional challenge. India's future influence in the region will therefore depend partly on whether it can strengthen its economic relationships alongside its growing security partnerships. Seen in this broader context, the Indo-Pacific is important to India not only because it is a theatre of strategic competition but also because it is closely connected with India's own economic and political rise. A stable maritime environment, stronger regional partnerships, secure supply chains and greater participation in regional institutions can all support India's long-term development. The Indo-Pacific strategy is consequently both an external response to changes in the balance of power and an attempt to create a more favourable environment for India's own emergence as a major power.

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Instruments, Regional Ambitions and Strategic Constraints

India's Indo-Pacific policy is implemented through several overlapping channels rather than through one central institutional arrangement. Bilateral partnerships, the Quad, ASEAN-led forums, Indian Ocean institutions, naval cooperation, development assistance, connectivity projects and technology partnerships all form part of India's wider regional engagement. This flexible structure suits India's preference for strategic autonomy because it allows different relationships to serve different purposes. The Quad is particularly important because it provides India with an avenue for working closely with the United States, Japan and Australia without creating a formal alliance. The grouping has developed a broad agenda that includes maritime security, infrastructure, critical technologies, health, climate and humanitarian assistance. For India, this offers practical benefits in terms of information, technology and strategic cooperation while avoiding the formal obligations associated with a military alliance. The Quad therefore fits reasonably well with India's broader effort to strengthen partnerships without giving up independent decision-making. India's relationship with ASEAN provides another important part of this strategy. Southeast Asia is strategically important because it connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans and because ASEAN countries have considerable influence over the region's institutional architecture. India's support for ASEAN centrality also helps it present the Indo-Pacific as a wider regional framework rather than simply an arrangement of major powers. Engagement with ASEAN gives India access to countries that may not want to choose sides in great-power competition and therefore value a more inclusive regional environment. Maritime cooperation is perhaps the most practical expression of India's regional ambitions. India has increased naval exercises, information sharing, maritime surveillance, capacity building and humanitarian assistance with countries across the Indian Ocean. These activities serve more than one purpose. They improve India's ability to monitor the maritime environment and respond to security problems, but they also create political relationships with smaller states. Assistance during natural disasters and other emergencies can generate trust in ways that conventional military diplomacy often cannot. India's connectivity efforts are another part of its regional strategy, although this remains an area where there is considerable room for improvement. India has supported transport, infrastructure and connectivity initiatives linking South Asia with Southeast Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region. Such projects can strengthen economic relationships and give India a more visible role in regional development. However, implementation has often been slower and the financial scale smaller than the major infrastructure initiatives associated with China. For India, the challenge is not simply to propose alternative connectivity projects but to deliver them in a timely and commercially meaningful manner.

Technology has also become increasingly important. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific is no longer limited to ships, military bases and territorial disputes. Artificial intelligence, telecommunications, semiconductors, cyber capabilities, digital infrastructure and other emerging technologies have become part of national security calculations. India has therefore begun to treat technology cooperation as an important element of its external partnerships. The ability to develop domestic technological capacity while working with trusted partners could become a major source of strategic strength in the coming years. Despite the expansion of these instruments, India's regional ambitions face several limitations. One of the most important is the gap between India's geographical importance and its actual capacity to maintain sustained influence across the Indo-Pacific. India's location gives it an important position in the Indian Ocean, but effective regional presence requires adequate naval assets, surveillance systems, logistics, infrastructure, trained personnel and financial resources. A wider regional role therefore demands continued investment in maritime and defence capabilities. Economic capacity presents another challenge. India's economic position has strengthened substantially, but its ability to finance large infrastructure and development projects abroad remains limited compared with China. For many smaller states, economic relationships are as important as security partnerships. If India wants to become a stronger regional influence, it will need to offer more opportunities in trade, investment, technology, infrastructure and development cooperation. Security partnerships alone may not be sufficient to produce long-term influence. There is also a strategic dilemma in India's relationship with the United States. Closer cooperation gives India access to technology, intelligence, defence capabilities and greater strategic leverage, particularly in relation to China. At the same time, India must ensure that this cooperation does not gradually reduce its freedom to pursue policies that differ from Washington's preferences. The same principle applies to India's relationship with other major powers. Maintaining multiple partnerships provides India with flexibility, but managing them simultaneously requires considerable diplomatic skill.

China remains the most difficult part of this balancing act. India's security concerns have increased, but an openly confrontational strategy would carry significant economic and security costs. India therefore has to strengthen its deterrence while keeping diplomatic channels open. This is one of the central contradictions of its Indo-Pacific policy: it wants to prevent any single power from dominating the region, but it must also avoid turning the Indo-Pacific into a rigid division between opposing camps. For this reason, India's regional influence should be judged not simply by the number of partnerships or strategic initiatives it has created. A more useful measure is whether these relationships produce lasting influence over regional outcomes. That depends on India's ability to provide practical benefits, maintain credible maritime capabilities, support regional institutions, deepen economic links and contribute to the management of regional crises. India nevertheless possesses an important advantage in this environment. Unlike states that are closely tied to a single strategic bloc, India maintains working relationships across different parts of the

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international system. It can cooperate with the United States and its allies while maintaining ties with Russia and engaging China. It can participate in the Quad while supporting ASEAN-led institutions. This flexibility gives New Delhi considerable diplomatic space. The longer-term question is whether India can convert this diplomatic flexibility into durable regional influence. Strategic autonomy provides India with room to manoeuvre, but autonomy becomes more meaningful when supported by economic strength, military capability and technological capacity. India's future position in the Indo-Pacific will therefore depend not only on the partnerships it builds but also on its ability to develop the domestic capabilities necessary to sustain them. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is consequently an evolving process rather than a fixed doctrine. It reflects an attempt to respond to China's rise, work with other major powers, protect maritime interests, expand economic opportunities and influence regional institutions without becoming tied to a rigid alliance structure. The central challenge is to maintain this flexibility while developing the capabilities required to give its regional ambitions greater substance. If India can narrow the gap between its strategic aspirations and its material capabilities, it will be better placed to move from being an important participant in the Indo-Pacific to becoming a more significant shaper of its emerging regional order.

Conclusion

India's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects its effort to respond to the changing global order while preserving strategic autonomy and expanding its regional influence. Its growing engagement with the Quad, ASEAN, maritime partnerships, SAGAR, connectivity and emerging technology initiatives shows that India is seeking to play a more active role in shaping the regional environment rather than simply responding to great-power competition. At the same time, limitations in economic resources, defence capabilities, technology and regional connectivity continue to constrain its ambitions. India's future role in the Indo-Pacific will therefore depend on its ability to strengthen these capabilities while maintaining flexible relations with competing powers. If India can successfully combine strategic autonomy with greater economic, technological and maritime capacity, it will be better positioned to contribute to a stable, inclusive and multipolar Indo-Pacific order.

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