

STRATEGIC BALANCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Indo-Pacific is generally understood to be the region between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean or between the eastern coast of Africa and the western coast of the United States. The two oceans meet around Indonesia. The term was made prominent by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, when in his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007,¹ he talked about the "confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans" as "the dynamic coupling" of "seas of freedom and of prosperity" in the "broader Asia". Prime Minister Narendra Modi later said, "Indo-Pacific is a region with 50 per cent of the world's population, and enormous diversity of religions, culture, languages, history and political and economic systems."² On the eve of the Shangri-La Dialogue at Singapore in June 2018, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis renamed the US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command. This was not an off-the-cuff remark but the culmination of a series of events that preceded the eventual declaration.³

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1. New Delhi Times Bureau, "Renaming US Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific: Implications for India", July 9, 2018, at <https://www.newdelhitimes.com/renaming-us-pacific-command-as-indo-pacific-implications-for-india/>. Accessed on March 23, 2021.
2. ANI, "Indo-Pacific region is our lifeline", says PM Modi, *Business Standard*, June 8, 2019, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/indo-pacific-region-is-our-lifeline-says-pm-modi-119060800814_1.html. Accessed on March 6, 2021.
3. New Delhi Times Bureau, n. 1.

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INDO-PACIFIC—THE TERM EVOLVES

Since 2011, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has been used in global strategic/geopolitical dialogues. The German geopolitician Karl Haushofer first used the term in the 1920s. Many scholars have tried to highlight the economic and strategic influence between the two oceans. The security linkages between the two only evolved around the year 2000. The term was first used in an article authored by Gurpreet Khurana, which was published in the January 2007 issue of the *Strategic Analysis* journal titled "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation".⁴ However, the term was first mentioned in an official document in Australia's Defence White Paper, 2013.⁵ Meanwhile, in the same year, US officials first started using the term 'Indo-Pacific' as a convenient way of describing the geographic inclusiveness.

The term got a more formal stamp when it was included in the joint statement issued by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and American President Donald Trump during the former's state visit to the White House on June 26, 2017.⁶ The statement read, "As responsible stewards in the Indo-Pacific region, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi agreed that a close partnership between the United States and India is central to peace and stability in the region. The objectives include combating terrorist threats, promoting stability across the Indo-Pacific region, increasing free and fair trade, and strengthening energy linkages."

4. Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", *Strategic Analysis* (IDSA/Routledge), Vol. 31 (1), January 2007, pp. 139-153.

5. Australian Government, Department of Defence, Defence White Paper 2013, p. 7, at https://www.defence.gov.au/Whitepaper/2013/docs/WP_2013_web.pdf. Accessed on March 20, 2021.

6. White House Foreign Policy Briefing, United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership, June 26, 2017, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-india-prosperity-partnership/>. Accessed on March 20, 2021.

POWER SHIFTS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Australian Government's Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017 indicated that economic growth in Asia was going to be the primary factor shaping the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific.⁷ It also expressed the concern that China's influence was growing in the Indo-Pacific region. Ultimately, how the Indo-Pacific will shape will depend not only on the other regional powers, Japan, Australia and India but also significant Southeast Asian states, such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

China became the world's largest trading nation of goods in 2013,⁸ and the world's largest economy in purchasing-power-parity terms in 2014. With that, the relationship between China and the world began changing. It became a major trade partner for many countries and began lending heavily, supporting infrastructure projects. China also increased its spending on defence, especially for maritime and air assets that would give it global reach.

China's regional forays are for its own geopolitical interests, especially so in the increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.⁹ Meanwhile, the United States will, for the foreseeable future, remain the wealthiest nation and have the most powerful military.

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7. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, Australian Government, pp. 28 and 40, at https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2017/australia_2017_foreign_policy_white_paper.pdf. Accessed on March 20, 2021.
 8. Jonathan Woetzel, Jeongmin Seong, Nick Leung, Joe Ngai, James Manyika, Anu Madgavkar, Susan Lund and Andrey Mironenko. "China and the world: Inside the dynamics of a changing relationship", (In Brief) McKinsey Global Institute. July 2019, at <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/china/china%20and%20the%20world%20inside%20the%20dynamics%20of%20a%20changing%20relationship/mgi-china-and-the-world-full-report-june-2019-vf.ashx>. Accessed on March 7, 2021.
 9. Bloomberg, "Australia warns of Asia power shift to China if US withdraws from region", *Financial Express*, November 23, 2017, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/australia-warns-of-asia-power-shift-to-china-if-us-withdraws-from-region/944865/>. Accessed on March 7, 2021.

With a rising and more competitive China, United States' focus has shifted to the security of the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰ Japan, the Republic of Korea and Australia remain its strong allies. The US is also conscious that major economic and military powers like India and Japan can now play a greater role of balancing in the Indo-Pacific. There are a large number of well identified ongoing maritime and land border disputes. The contested boundary claims are posing challenges to freedom of navigation in the seas, and perceived air violations.

INDIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC BALANCE OF POWER

Nitin Pai, Director, Takshashila Institution, says that "ultimately, India's most important role in the Indo-Pacific is to be a more successful form of itself: demonstrating that strong economic growth can be achieved within a diverse, plural, liberal democracy."¹¹ As China bridges the power gap with the United States, India, even though a few notches below, is becoming a balancing power with regional influence. Yet the Indian government is treading with caution and prefers strategic autonomy, and maintaining balanced distance, with issue-based stands. India has had a strategic partnership with the United States since the early 2000s. India also shares the stage with China in the BRICS. It is part of Chinese-led SCO and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). India-US nuclear agreement of 2005 and the grant of waiver to India by the Nuclear Suppliers Group flowed from US strategic inclination to strengthen India as a bulwark against China. Meanwhile, China's assertive behaviour and its strong strategic alignment with Pakistan, has pushed India to seek closer alliance with the United States.

10. "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific Advancing a Shared Vision", US State Department Document, November 4, 2019, at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>. Accessed on March 20, 2021.

11. Nitin Pai, "India and the Indo-Pacific Balance of Power", *Indian National Interest*, August 1, 2017, at <https://nationalinterest.in/india-and-the-indo-pacific-balance-of-power-1814c5a5f6a1>. Accessed on March 9, 2021.

INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY

India's Look East Policy is a strategic initiative to cultivate and strengthen economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia.¹² It will help India counter Chinese strategic influence in the region. According to former Indian Ambassador Rajiv Sikri, "India missed a crucial opportunity during this period to leverage India's shared colonial experience, cultural affinities and lack of historical baggage to build strong economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asia."¹³

Now once again, after a military coup, and in the eye of a storm, Myanmar remains India's main passage to Southeast Asia. India has many one-on-one free-trade agreements with its South Asian neighbours. The multilateral ones include the 2006 South Asia Free Trade Agreement, and the 2010 ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA).

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are also important groupings. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway will connect Moreh, India with Mae Sot, Thailand via Myanmar. There are plans to extend this route to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Bangladesh is also now keen to join it. The Kaladan project will connect Kolkata port with Sittwe Port in Myanmar by sea. This port will further be linked by road to India's Mizoram. Thus, India will get well connected to its traditional maritime friends on either side of the Malacca Straits. This should somewhat reduce Chinese dominance.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE—INDIAN CONCERNS

India rightly fears that China's BRI is essentially a Chinese Belt and Chinese Road. India's relatively poor neighbours are attracted by low-cost Chinese financing and technical assistance for better connectivity. But, as has happened in Pakistan and Sri Lanka—among others—countries get into a

12. Jacob Goldberg, "What Is India's Look East Policy?", ThoughtCo.com. Updated November 12, 2019, at <https://www.thoughtco.com/look-east-policy-of-india-1435050>. Accessed on March 2, 2021.

13. Anna Louise Strachan, Harnit Kaur Kang, Tuli Sinha and Rajiv Sikri, "Report. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2009", at www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09289. Accessed on March 31, 2020.

debt trap, having to cede land access to China. Such behaviour and presence of China is to the detriment of India's geostrategic interests in the region. India is concerned that Chinese investments in infrastructure development in different regions have more than just a commercial angle.¹⁴ Some of this often turns into a debt trap, as has happened in the past when China has ended up seeking strategic assets in exchange for debt waiver.

INDIA'S BALANCING ACT

India is concerned about excessive Chinese dominance of the Indo-Pacific region. In a major foreign policy speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi repeatedly invoked the principle of equality of all nations. "We see the assertion of power over recourse to international norms," he said, and called for a "common rules-based order for the region ... that must apply to all ... based on sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁵

Most of China's other neighbours are also concerned about China's bulldozer approach and hegemony. Although Prime Minister Modi declared that "India does not see the Indo-Pacific as a strategy", the ground reality seems to indicate something different.¹⁶ While India's 'Look East' and 'Act East' may formally be aimed at closer cooperation with ASEAN economies, countering China is clearly an implicit aim.

INDIA'S EMERGING ROLE IN INDO-PACIFIC

India has become part of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic system through joint military exercises, patrolling, port calls, anti-piracy missions and humanitarian missions.¹⁷ Indian Navy warships are increasingly sailing east of Malacca. India's reluctance to participate in multilateral military exercises has been shed. India and Japan are moving closer in economic partnership.

14. Nitin Pai, n. 11.

15. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, issue 1, January 2020, pp. 75-93, at <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/1/75/5697517>. Accessed on March 23, 2021.

16. Ibid.

17. Nitin Pai, n. 11.

ASEAN nations have their own issues with China and some may hesitate to antagonise Beijing, preferring to do a fine balancing act. Ultimately, what will count for India is its own economic and military strength for standing and influence in the region.

INDIA'S EAST ASIAN CONNECT

In 1993, India befriended Myanmar's military junta and signed trade agreements. New Delhi is involved in construction of major roads and highways, pipelines and upgrading of ports. Despite Myanmar's close links with China, India is supporting Myanmar by training its military personnel, and cooperating on controlling cross-border separatist militant movements and drug trafficking. India is concerned about China constructing naval and surveillance facilities along Myanmar's coast and the Coco Islands. In response, India has stepped up its own development of facilities in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

India today has strong commercial, cultural and military relations with Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines. Sri Lanka and Thailand cooperate closely with India. China's hegemony in the region, its historic animosity and distrust of Japan, its dispute with Japan over island territories, serious territorial water disputes in South China Sea, and frequent border incursions into India have brought Japan and India closer, culminating in the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India. The two countries upgraded their bilateral relationship to "Special Strategic and Global Partnership". Japan and India now conduct "2+2" meetings, the annual "Defense Ministerial Dialogue" and "Coast Guard-to-Coast Guard dialogue". In September 2020, the two sides signed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that will permit armed forces of both sides to coordinate closely in services and supplies. Earlier they had signed the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology Agreement 2015; Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information (2015); and Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy. Maritime, cybersecurity, military intelligence are areas of common interest. These engagements will

Japan openly supported India on Doklam.

Other south-eastern nations, including Vietnam, watched the reactions of the two sides closely. India's firm stand and mature restraint enhanced Delhi's position as an emerging power.

be incomplete if the two armed forces don't regularly take part in joint exercises.

While India remains a supporter of the "One China" policy, it has increased its engagement with Taiwan over a common emphasis on democracy, human rights and strategic interests. India has a tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command, and there is a fresh push for security infrastructure development. India and Singapore have been conducting joint naval exercises (SIMBEX) since 1993. Maritime exercises with Vietnam have been going on

since 2000. The Indian Navy has also carried out joint patrols with Indonesia in the Andaman Sea since 2002.

INDIA-CHINA STAND-OFFS

The 2017 Doklam border stand-off was caused when China constructed a road in Doklam near the tri-junction border area. After nearly 75 days, both sides withdrew their troops. This stand-off—closely watched by Asian countries—has shown that China's expansionist ambitions are not unstoppable.¹⁸ Japan openly supported India on Doklam. Other south-eastern nations, including Vietnam, watched the reactions of the two sides closely. India's firm stand and mature restraint enhanced Delhi's position as an emerging power. During Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to India in December 2017, he said that, despite the Doklam dispute which had complicated the relationship, China and India have far greater shared strategic interests than differences.¹⁹

18. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India's geopolitical status goes up after Doklam standoff ends", *Economic Times*, July 13, 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indias-geopolitical-status-goes-up-after-doklam-standoff-ends/articleshow/60282585.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on March 6, 2021.

19. Bharath Gopalaswamy and Aditya Ramachandran, "The Shifting Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific", December 19, 2017, at <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/the-shifting-balance-of-power-in-the-indo-pacific>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

Another stand-off between India and China began around the north and south banks of Pangong Tso in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020. Chinese troops crossed the LAC in four areas. There was a major transgression in Galwan Valley, which became the site of a major altercation between Indian and Chinese troops on June 15, 2020, in which 20 Indian soldiers and an undeclared number of Chinese troops were killed. Meanwhile, the Indian forces gained strategic advantage in the south bank of the lake in late August 2020 by occupying certain heights of the Magar Hill, Mukhpari, Gurung Hill, Rezang La and Rechin La. Both sides had around 50,000 troops in the region. These were supported by a large number of tanks, artillery and air defence assets. The air forces of both sides had moved to forward locations and were carrying out regular patrolling and ISR missions. Transport and helicopters were carrying out logistic support missions. After repeated rounds of talks at the levels of military commanders and diplomatic officials, the stand-off between China and India in Ladakh resulted in a mutually acceptable disengagement agreement in February 2021. China was once again made aware of India's resolve to protect its sovereignty.

China's rise is a direct challenge to US global dominance and position. The United States is trying to counter this rise by building its own strength through alliances in the region.

TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP (TPP)

The Trans-Pacific Partnership²⁰ was a proposed trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States signed on February 4, 2016. It was not ratified, so it did not come into effect. USA withdrew from TPP in January 2017. The remaining countries negotiated a new trade

20. James McBride and Andrew Chatzky, "What is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?", Council on Foreign Relations, January 4, 2019, at <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

agreement called “Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership”, which incorporates most of the provisions of the TPP and which entered into force on December 30, 2018. It was felt that the deal would have reduced their dependence on China and brought them closer to the US. After all, the TPP agreement was part of President Obama’s Pivot to Asia foreign policy. Meanwhile, China continued to enter into trade deals with key nations in the region, demonstrating a serious decline in American hard and soft regional power.

QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE (QUAD)

China’s rise is a direct challenge to US global dominance and position. The United States is trying to counter this rise by building its own strength through alliances in the region. China’s threat is not only to the US, but also to democratic Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and many South East Asian nations. It is also a threat to India. Any balancing by the US will also support Japan, Australia and India vis-à-vis China.²¹ India is considered an important counterbalance to China. Japan and India together have significant economic and military power.

The Quad began as an informal strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India initiated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007. The joint military exercise Malabar followed. The Chinese government issued a formal diplomatic protest to its members. The significance of Quad increased after the tensions caused by Chinese territorial ambitions in the SCS. After the meeting of Quad Foreign Ministers in September 2019, the US Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells, spoke to media in New York:²² “a wide-ranging discussion of our collective efforts to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, but also touching on counterterrorism,

21. David Scott, “The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts”, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 3, issue 2, August 2018, p. 20, at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8891/ee0e0197b4bccebcae4e5684815124ba2fd5.pdf?_ga=2.2697648.1605024220.1585743187-1699218414.1583153731. Accessed on March 7, 2021.

22. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “India’s fine balancing act with Quad and BRICS meet in New York”, *Economic Times*, September 28, 2019.

humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security cooperation, development finance, and cyber-security.”

US-INDIAN MILITARY COOPERATION

Active US-Indian military cooperation expanded in 1991 following India’s economic liberalisation when the US proposed army-to-army cooperation. A “New Framework for India-US Defence” was signed in 2005. It envisaged increased military, defence industry and technology cooperation. Also, a “Framework on Maritime Security Cooperation” was signed. India and the United States have been participating in regular joint military exercises since then. These include Cope-India (Air Force), Yudh Abhyas (Army) and Vajra Prahar (Special Forces). The two sides are increasingly engaged in multilateral exercises, such as the Malabar, Red Flag, and RIMPAC, covering the broad expanse of the Indo-Pacific.²³

The US has four “foundational” agreements that it usually signs with its defence partners. India signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002. The agreement enables the sharing of military intelligence between the two countries. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), that permits either side’s military to use the other’s bases for resupplying or carrying out repairs was signed in August 2016. The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed during the inaugural 2+2 dialogue in September 2018. It is an India-specific variant of Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) that enables the two countries to share secure communication and exchange information on approved equipment during bilateral and multinational training exercises and operations. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) was signed in October 2020, and this permits the exchange of unclassified and controlled geospatial products, topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data, products and services.

23. Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, “Indo-US Defence Partnership: Future Prospects”, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, June 26, 2019, at <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/indo-us-defence-partnership-srchinoy-260620>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

Harsh V. Pant, Professor of International Relations at King's College, London, has highlighted the importance of India to US strategic planning: "India is key to the US' ability to create a stable balance of power in the larger Indo-Pacific and at a time of resource constraints, it needs partners like India to shore up its sagging credibility in the region in face of Chinese onslaught."²⁴ The US opened up high-technology defence exports to India, in many cases giving it the same status as its NATO allies. Since 2008, India has purchased the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, the C-17 and C-130 aircraft, the Chinook and Apache helicopters, M777 Howitzers, and more recently the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), version II, multilayered air defence shield and 24 MH-60 Sikorsky Romeo multirole helicopters. Currently two Sea Guardian Predator drones are on lease to the Indian Navy. This is considered a prelude to a larger order for the three Armed Forces.

UNITED STATES INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND (INDOPACOM)

INDOPACOM is the oldest and largest of the unified combatant commands of USA. It covers 260,000,000 sq km, or roughly 52 per cent of the Earth's surface, stretching from the West Coast of the USA to the West Coast of India, and from the Arctic to the Antarctic.²⁵ It includes a sizeable strength of all US military components, and the US Forces in Japan and South Korea. Originally called the Pacific Command (PACOM), it was renamed US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018 to cover the Indian Ocean. With headquarters at Hawaii, its area now stretches from San Diego to Diego Garcia. Traditionally, the Commander has always been from the US Navy.

PACAF is the air component command. PACAF has seen combat in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Operations Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, among others. PACAF operates nearly 375 aircraft from nine main airbases in Japan, South Korea, Alaska, Pearl Harbour, and Guam. The US Navy's Pacific Fleet operates nearly 200 ships, five aircraft carrier groups, and nearly 1,100 aircraft.

24. "India-UnitedStatesrelations", Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India%E2%80%93United_States_relations

25. Ibid.

US PACIFIC DETERRENCE INITIATIVE²⁶ (PDI)

The US Indo-Pacific Command's US\$ 20 billion wish list—to be allotted over 6 years—to deter China has been presented to the US Congress. This includes funding a defensive ring around Guam with an increased stockpile of long-range weapons. The strategy is to regain the advantage. Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) would focus on China. It is also meant to be a message of US commitment to their Asian friends, and sends a strong signal to China that the US is committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The PDI will be more focused on Navy and Air Force needs. It will include strengthening allies and partners. There is a need to build land-based anti-ship and anti-air capabilities along the first island chain, and integrated air missile defence in the second island chain.

OTHER REGIONAL ASSETS OF USA

Guam sits in the "second island chain", which runs from Japan's Bonin Island, and is considered the US "tip of the spear". Its deep-water facilities enable it to handle aircraft carriers, and its long airstrip at Andersen airbase is able to house heavy strategic B-52 bombers. Guam hosted the US, Japan and India during the June 2018 trilateral Malabar exercises.²⁷ The US has a significant presence in Japan, with a carrier group at Yokusaka and Ryukyu chain of islands, just off Taiwan. Taiwan and Japan make a great strategic combination in the vicinity of China. The US has basing facilities at Palawan in the Philippines facing the South China Sea. The US also has berthing facilities at Da Nang in Vietnam. Indonesian and US air forces have conducted the Cope West exercises every year since 2012. Indonesia has been described as

26. Aaron Mehta, "Inside US Indo-Pacific Command's \$20 billion wish list to deter China—and why Congress may approve it", April 2, 2020, at https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/04/02/inside-us-indo-pacific-commands-20-billion-wish-list-to-deter-china-and-why-congress-may-approve-it/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Breaking%20News%2004.02.20&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Breaking%20News. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

27. David Scott, "The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts", *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 3, issue 2, August 2018, pp. 21-29, at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8891/ee0e0197b4bccebcae4e5684815124ba2fd5.pdf?_ga=2.2697648.1605024220.1585743187-1699218414.1583153731. Accessed on March 25, 2021.

The JSDF has its focus on China. It has had active military interaction and participation with South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Singapore and India. The USA and UK have been long-term partners. The Japanese Air Force carries out combat air patrols around Japan, and maintains a network of ground and air early-warning radars.

“a geographic and diplomatic fulcrum for the Indo-Pacific region.”²⁸

The US has defence links with Singapore²⁹ established since 2005, which were further strengthened in 2015, with special aircraft carrier berthing facilities, and regular aircraft deployments in Singapore. The US has a Marine Rotational Force at Darwin in Australia since November 2011.³⁰ The UK atoll of Diego Garcia has a major US base since 1977. This gives it a major foothold in the Indian Ocean.

OTHER US FRIENDLY MAJOR AIR FORCES

The Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) is the unified military force of Japan. It has inducted the latest hardware, including F-35As. The JSDF has its focus on China. It has had active military interaction and participation with South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Singapore and India. The US and UK have been long-term partners. The Japanese Air Force carries out combat air patrols around Japan, and maintains a network of ground and air early-warning radars. It is estimated to have around 750 aircraft, approximately 375 of them fighter aircraft, such as the Mitsubishi F-2 (based on the F-16), F-15 Eagle, and F-35 Lightning II. Japan operates Boeing E-767 and E-2 Hawkeye AEW&C aircraft, and flight refuelling aircraft. The Royal Australian Air Force has 259 aircraft, of which 110 are combat aircraft, such as F-18 variants, and F-35A Lightning II. They also have P8A Poseidon, C 130J Hercules, C-17A Globemaster III and KC-30A MRTT, among others. The Vietnam People's Air Force has nearly 300 aircraft, including Sukhoi Su-22, Su-27, and Su-30.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

RIMPAC

Hawaii based RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) Exercise is the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise held every even-numbered year. Hosted by the US Navy, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK participate in it. Chile, Colombia, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Peru, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand have been regular participants. The New Zealand navy is frequently involved. Observer nations are usually invited. These have included China, Ecuador, India, Mexico, the Philippines and Russia.

Amidst all the volatility in global power equations, India's most important partner, currently, is Japan. Both have been challenged by Chinese territorial claims. India and Japan want to neutralise Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean region through mutual economic assistance.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES

The US released its national security strategy in December 2017. It included a specific section on "The Indo-Pacific"³¹ that cautioned that "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region, which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States" in which "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region", but for which "the United States must marshal the will and capabilities to compete and prevent unfavourable shifts in the Indo-Pacific." This was to be achieved through forward deployment of US forces. The Quad nations were expected to participate. Bilateral arrangements were to be made with Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. Similarly, the 2018 National Defense Strategy³² talked of strengthening alliances and attracting new partners.

31. Ibid.

32. "Summary of National Defense Strategy 2018", US Department of Defense, at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

JAPAN, INDIA'S KEY STRATEGIC PARTNER³³

Amidst all the volatility in global power equations, India's most important partner, currently, is Japan. Both have been challenged by Chinese territorial claims. India and Japan want to neutralise Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean region through mutual economic assistance. They are working jointly on development projects with countries in the Indian Ocean region so as to reduce their dependence on China. China has vast resources and these can be only jointly balanced by Japan and India.

RCEP AND CPTPP

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) are two major strategic economic alignments in the Indo-Pacific. Both groupings have ASEAN as a vital component. All ten ASEAN members are part of RCEP. Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei are also part of the Canada-led CPTPP. India, though eligible for RCEP membership, has opted out currently because it perceives that China will dominate RCEP. Instead, India has opted for bilateral trade pacts with similar arrangements with most participants.

BALANCING CHINA—GROUND REALITIES³⁴

China's neighbours "are certain to fear its rise" and "will do whatever they can to prevent it from achieving regional hegemony", including joining "an American-led balancing coalition to check China's rise." While remaining diplomatically and economically engaged with it, they are seeking to preserve their security and sovereignty too. Most, including those who have lost territory or rights in the South China Sea, want to remain equidistant from opposing Superpowers, and distance themselves from military

33. G. Parthasarathy, "Emerging balance of power in Asia", *The Hindu Business Line*, November 28, 2018, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/g-parthasarathy/emerging-balance-of-power-in-asia/article25616068.ece>. Accessed on March 31, 2021.

34. Jeff Smith, "China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific", The Heritage Foundation, January 9, 2019, at <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/chinas-rise-and-under-balancing-the-indo-pacific-putting-realist-theory-the-test>. Accessed on March 7, 2021.

alliances, exercises, or even naval patrols. Even the members of the “Quad” have reservations about a Cold War-style containment strategy.

Most of China’s neighbours prefer a balancing approach. Regional defence collaboration is mostly limited to multilateral dialogues and joint vision statements. China has pushed Quad members together by heightening concerns about its challenges to the rules-based order, as in South China Sea. This is despite the fact that China is the largest trading partner for all four Quad countries too. Countries like Pakistan, Cambodia and Laos are actually increasing their dependency on China and letting it make security and economic inroads. ASEAN states prefer to be neutral, and hope that international system of justice will prevail and support them in time of crisis or conflict. China is conscious of the economic globalisation and dependence of these nations and exploits the situation to its advantage.

While Beijing freely disregards laws, norms, and international opinion on South China Sea, it has ensured that ASEAN does not form a consensus to oppose it. Most Chinese neighbours, other than Taiwan, don’t fear a kinetic action or Chinese-funded insurgencies. They believe China poses a threat to their interests, autonomy, and grey-zone coercion designed to induce submission. Vietnam and Indonesia could take a somewhat independent line and are possible contenders to come closer to Quad. Some ASEAN member states are concerned that Quad will leave ASEAN out in the cold. Even Quad members advocate defence collaboration privately at a bilateral level. Currently the US is publicly attacking China on human rights, intellectual theft and economic protectionism.

CHINA’S RESPONSE TO THE INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

China is fully aware of the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy. It is factoring this in its geostrategic plans. The Chinese academic community has debated its possible impact on the future of US-China relations.³⁵ Clearly, the concept and target are to contain rising China and maintain

35. Dingding Chen, “Chinese scholars see the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy as containment, but aren’t convinced it’ll stick”, *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-china-thinks-of-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>. Accessed on March 30, 2021.

US global leadership. Meanwhile, China has invested heavily to buy friends, has added many ports, and increased sailings in parts of the Indian Ocean.

CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA

Rajesh Rajagopalan, Professor of International Politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, has looked at India's strategic choices.³⁶ He says,

China is a direct military threat to India, particularly in light of the two countries' border disputes. Though India has considerable military power, China's forces are already stronger and better-funded, and Beijing's outsized wealth will likely allow it to outspend New Delhi for the foreseeable future. Beijing's influence in both established international organizations like the United Nations and in new institutions China is setting up, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, gives Beijing opportunities to hamper Indian interests and goals in multilateral forums. China's alignment with Pakistan and deepening relations with other South Asian countries represents a significant challenge to India's position in the region, which otherwise New Delhi had dominated for decades. Beijing's ability to provide financial assistance and balance against New Delhi may tempt India's smaller neighbors to play one power against the other, undermining India in its own backyard. China's economic power allows Beijing to spread its influence around the world, which could be used to India's detriment.

China is clear. It wants to be the only major power in Asia. It wants to call the shots. Asia is its area of influence. It sees India as a challenger. And is trying to hem India in by making strategic friends among India's neighbours. At the very least, it is trying to bring them in its sphere of influence. Some smaller states are playing China against India for short-term gains.

36. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Strategic Choices: China and the Balance of Power in Asia", Carnegie India, September 14, 2017, at <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/09/14/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-73108>. Accessed on March 23, 2021.

Every country has to decide and secure its own interests. India has many options to choose from. It can stay non-aligned; be part of regional alliances; align with the United States; align with Russia or China, or both; or opt for issue-based alignments. In all cases, India must build its economic and military strength to be able to have bargaining power or dictating strength. The non-alignment that existed during the initial years of the Cold War is no more relevant. Relations with China are going to remain troubled in the foreseeable future due to serious boundary issues, competing regional interests, and diametrically opposite political approaches of authoritarian communism vs democracy. Russia is a declining power with a not-so-great state of economy. Russia will have to play second fiddle to China in its own strategic relations. India and Russia have historic relations. Nearly 60 per cent of India's defence hardware continues to be of Russian origin. More is still being acquired. The Soviet Union, Russia's predecessor, was of great support to India during the 1971 war. This umbilical cord will have to stay. Yet, close Russia-China relations will not help India to counter China. A closer alignment with Washington or a US-led grouping can be of interest to India. India should preferably align with free-world democracies. India and the US both have an interest in containing China. The US is the only country with state-of-the-art military technologies which will be crucial for India. It is the only power that is stronger than China. A US-led grouping of strong economies in the region would easily counterbalance China.

During the recent Ladakh showdown between India and China, some of the western countries like France and Israel supported India with defence hardware. The US, reportedly, continuously provided intelligence information. Any strategic partnership takes time to mature and build trust. It takes time for militaries to build interoperability. India cannot decide on a suitable strategic partner after a crisis has already developed.

India's current stand remains strategic autonomy. Yet, clearly in the last two decades, India has been gradually tilting towards the USA. With China pulling much ahead of India in most fields that constitute strategic power, India will require to align with someone who can provide support beyond

As for air power, India is already engaged in supporting ASEAN countries for aircraft spares and maintenance, and for training of air and ground crew. India needs to seek and tie up landing rights and overflight rights with more countries. Also, India can have LEMOA like logistics agreements with other militaries.

just arms supplies. The strategic partner should be militarily and economically strong, and have means to support India in global institutions. Should India remain suspicious of military-like alliances? Does India have a choice? India will have to take its calls.

In the meantime, India has to build military strength for its own security, a form of insurance that cannot be ignored. Building sufficient military capabilities which will act as a deterrent against Beijing to not open a second front in case of war with Pakistan. India can currently only deter China and can at best be a bulwark and stand up firmly. China cannot take on the combined might of

the US and its Asian allies that may surround China, such as Japan, South Korea and others.

Regional balancing is a strategy India must pursue to align with other Asian countries, such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Other countries that have been affected by China's actions in South China Sea are Malaysia and Indonesia. Perhaps they too would be interested in being part of a counterbalancing grouping. Yet, they are all dependent on China. A regional balancing approach would permit India to balance China without directly aligning with a major bloc led by the United States. To support this, India needs to develop regional connectivity infrastructure quickly, especially through Bangladesh and Myanmar. Unfortunately, this is not happening at the required speed. On the other hand, China's economic might and leverages enable it to neutralise Indian efforts. However, India has the advantage of being a democracy, that makes it easier for most countries to deal with it against a closed and authoritarian China. But, regional balancing alone may not be good enough; India will also need to have economic and military strength and a big-brother approach.

As for air power, India is already engaged in supporting ASEAN countries for aircraft spares and maintenance, and for training of air and ground crew. India needs to seek and tie up landing rights and overflight rights with more countries. Also, India can have LEMOA like logistics agreements with other militaries. India should engage in air exercises with countries like Japan and Vietnam. Landing and logistics rights will give India greater reach.

While India pursues regional balancing and military strength, aligning closely with the United States without a formal alliance is a choice. This will not be easy because of years of suspicion, and the tacit alignment with the Soviet Union and Russia. India's close relationship with the United States is just over a decade old. India needed support of the United States for the NSG waiver, and high-technology military equipment. Any alignment with the United States will be complex, and principally for the need to tackle the challenge created by China's rise. There are already serious trade issues between the two. A close partnership with the US would help India balance China, which no other country can help it do. The United States is powerful, and has a self-interest in partnering with India. The United States has a global network of alliances and partnerships. Russia, India's traditional strategic partner, does not have such strength or global influence. Though, there is the possibility that China may overtake the USA as the leading global power.

The United States will have a greater role in the region, for China is already much more powerful than most Asian nations, including India. Yet India is the only big regional power that can stand-up to China. It has demonstrated the same repeatedly at Doklam, and more recently, in Ladakh. With its current growth trajectory, China is set to overtake the USA in another decade or so. Japan, India and the US are the three countries most concerned about China's rise and expansionist tendencies and the need to contain them.

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The US' capacity to advance Indian interests in multilateral forums makes it a natural ally for India.

Despite China's rise, the United States will remain the world leader in high-tech research and development, and advanced weapons for some decades. While India is a self-respecting major nation and will not like to hang onto another nation's coat-tails, the US will certainly be an insurance against Chinese foolhardy acts of belligerence. There seems to be an evolving political acceptance of such a partnership. This, of course, will have to balance India's relationships with others, especially Russia. Much to Russia's dislike, currently the US has pushed Russia into Chinese arms. Meanwhile, India and US have different geopolitical positions on many regional disputes which would have to be set aside. That the US partnered or jettisoned many allies in the past, including Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan, also creates doubts.

Vivek Mishra has written about India's nuanced Indo-Pacific Strategy.³⁷ He says, "Although India has created a robust strategic arc from the Persian Gulf and the Asia-Pacific, its Indo-Pacific strategy is more nuanced, involving careful balancing between multiple stakeholders." He further says, "for instance, though India has promised the United States and its ilk that it will help to shape a regional strategy in line with their multilateral Indo-Pacific vision, its multifaceted relationships with China and Russia demand that New Delhi also create latitude for Beijing and Moscow within this vision." At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi confessed that "no other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China." India's Indo-Pacific strategy, clearly, is meant to avoid direct confrontation with China despite the support of the United States. India is practising mature balancing. While it exercises with Quad, and many western armed forces, it does the same with Russia and China. India has engaged in hand-to-hand combat exercises and in maritime dialogue with China. These multiple equations of India make things complex and confuse the Americans. Fortunately, the world is conscious of India's historic

37. Vivek Mishra, "India's nuanced Indo-Pacific strategy", *South Asian Voices*, November 1, 2018, at <https://southasianvoices.org/india-indo-pacific-strategy/>. Accessed on March 7, 2021.

connects, limitations and challenges and that foreign policies are dynamic and take time to evolve. Who would have thought that within a few years of World War II, Germany and Japan would become America's strategic partners? Who would have similarly thought that America would woo an autocratic communist nation like China to become America's friend against the Soviet Union? Washington actually helped build China to become a major competitor and adversary. India is an old civilisation with a high value system. New Delhi's Indo-Pacific policy will be based on its own regional realities and interests. Clearly, the United States and other allies will have to accommodate India's sensitivities and support its aspirations to become a meaningful partner in the new security arrangement in the neighbourhood.