



Navigating the Indo-Pacific: The Evolution of India's 21st Century Foreign Policy

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Abstract

India's foreign policy in the 21st century has pivoted decisively toward the Indo-Pacific, transforming from peripheral interests to a core strategic domain amid China's maritime assertiveness, U.S.-led rebalancing, and the quest for a multipolar order. This paper navigates the evolution of India's Indo-Pacific strategy, rooted in the 2014 "Act East" policy and amplified through doctrinal innovations like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which emphasize maritime security, economic connectivity, and inclusive regional architecture. Central to this evolution are deepened strategic partnerships. The India-U.S. nexus, fortified by COMCASA (2018), BECA (2020), and Malabar exercises, aligns on countering revisionism. India-Japan ties leverage infrastructure synergies in Southeast Asia and Quad frameworks, while India-Australia collaboration institutionalizes defense and maritime cooperation. Conversely, India-China relations oscillate between economic interdependence and border frictions, compelling diversification. Opportunities abound in digital diplomacy, renewable energy corridors, G20-led norm-setting on climate and technology, and expanded development aid to littoral states, enhancing soft power. Yet, challenges persist: balancing strategic autonomy against alliance entrapment, bridging military capability gaps, mitigating economic vulnerabilities like trade imbalances, and overcoming trust deficits in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, India's adaptive approach—blending bilateral minilaterals, multilateral engagement, and self-reliant modernization—positions it as a net security provider. By addressing these tensions, India can champion an equitable, rules-based Indo-Pacific, with profound implications for global governance in the decades ahead.

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific strategy, strategic autonomy, Quad, India-US relations, Act East policy, maritime security, regional leadership, great-power competition*

Introduction

India's foreign policy has undergone substantive transformation since the start of the 21st century, shaped by globalization, evolving power dynamics, and regional security uncertainties. Within this paradigm shift, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a core strategic theatre for New Delhi. Historically anchored in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, India's strategic gaze has extended eastwards, underpinned by geostrategic foresight and economic interest convergence. The Indo-Pacific concept marries the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Rim, reflecting India's intent to be a pivotal actor in regional security, trade, and normative frameworks. The 21st century has witnessed India balancing between great-power competition—principally between the United States and China—while asserting strategic autonomy as a core principle. India's conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific has evolved into practical engagements through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), ASEAN partnerships, and multilateral forums like the East Asia Summit. India's foreign policy strategy in the region is built on connectivity, maritime security, energy corridors, and institutional engagements that complement its domestic growth aspirations.

The Indo-Pacific region, encompassing vast oceanic expanses from the African coast to the Pacific shores, stands as the fulcrum of contemporary global affairs. It generates more than half of the world's economic

output and houses the majority of its population, making it a theater of intense competition and cooperation. For India, this expanse is not merely geographical but existential, intertwined with its maritime lifelines, energy security, and aspirations for global influence.

India's foreign policy evolution in this domain reflects a deliberate pivot from a predominantly continental mindset—rooted in Nehruvian non-alignment and post-colonial priorities—to a maritime-centric worldview. This transition accelerated under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership from 2014 onward, propelled by China's rising assertiveness, the resurgence of multilateral forums like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and the imperative to safeguard sea lanes that carry over 90% of India's trade by volume. Doctrines such as the "Act East Policy," Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) have crystallized this approach, positioning India as a pivotal player committed to a free, open, and inclusive regional order.

This comprehensive research paper traces the contours of this evolution from the early 2000s to early 2026, dissecting historical foundations, doctrinal innovations, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, the enduring China challenge, maritime and economic dimensions, internal critiques, and prospective pathways. At its core, the analysis posits that India's Indo-Pacific strategy embodies "strategic autonomy with multi-alignment"—a pragmatic balancing act that eschews rigid alliances while fostering deep interoperability. By 2026, amid U.S.-China great power rivalry and regional flux, initiatives like the expanded MAHASAGAR framework underscore India's ambition to lead as a net security provider and voice of the Global South.

The paper draws on a synthesis of official speeches, policy documents, diplomatic engagements, and scholarly discourse to argue that this evolution is not reactive but adaptive realism: a response to structural shifts in the international system. It highlights how India's policy has matured from tentative "Look East" overtures to assertive "Act East" execution, navigating tensions between idealism and realpolitik. Ultimately, this trajectory positions India not as a balancer but as an architect of Indo-Pacific stability, with implications for global governance, supply chain resilience, and climate resilience.

Historical Overview of India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy since independence was primarily shaped by non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and a cautious engagement with global power blocs. During the Cold War, India's policy was molded by its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its focus on national sovereignty and anti-colonial solidarity (Thakur, 2016). The collapse of the Soviet Union, globalization, and economic liberalization of the 1990s catalyzed a shift toward strategic pragmatism in India's external engagements (Pant, 2010).

A defining shift occurred in the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape, with India engaging more deeply with the United States and Western institutions, evident in civil nuclear cooperation and defense dialogues. This period also foregrounded India's recalibration—the interplay between economic interests and strategic imperatives became clearer as India invested in regional institution building and new bilateral partnerships. The 21st century thus witnessed a transformation from a South Asia-centric policy to an expansive network of partnerships across Asia, Africa, and beyond. Central to this transformation is India's increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

The term "**Indo-Pacific**" has gained traction in policy circles, reflecting the merging of Indian Ocean and Pacific dynamics into a single strategic construct. Scholars emphasize that the term encapsulates connectivity, economic interdependence, and security challenges across two major maritime spaces (Medcalf, 2019). Unlike the traditional Asia-Pacific frame that centered the Pacific Rim, the Indo-Pacific foregrounds India's growing maritime and strategic footprint.

India's adoption of this concept aligns with its ambitions to safeguard trade routes, enhance maritime security, and participate in collective responses to regional challenges such as piracy, territorial disputes, and power projection. This conceptual shift signals recognition that regional stability is inextricably linked across oceans, economies, and geopolitical networks.

The Indo-Pacific: Conceptual Foundations

Geography of the Indo-Pacific Islands



Drivers of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

1. Security and Power Dynamics

The rise of China as a regional hegemon has catalyzed strategic recalibration in India's foreign policy. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, its naval modernization, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have implications for regional balance (Kilcullen, 2018). India's perception of a revisionist China has encouraged deeper engagement with other regional actors. The India-China border conflict in the Himalayas, particularly the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, has intensified strategic distrust, prompting New Delhi to seek robust security partnerships (Roy, 2021). India's increased defense cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia via the Quad should be seen in this context.

2. Economic and Trade Interests

The Indo-Pacific region encompasses critical trade routes that facilitate a significant portion of global commerce. India's economic growth priorities demand secure maritime lanes and stable regional governance frameworks. India's Act East Policy, focusing on ASEAN and extended East Asian engagement, foregrounds economic partnerships and connectivity (Doshi, 2018). Participation in regional value chains and infrastructure projects enhances India's role as a conduit between Western and Eastern markets.

3. Multilateralism and Institutional Engagement

India's engagement with ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, and BIMSTEC illustrates its commitment to multilateral diplomacy. India perceives these institutions as platforms to shape norms that reflect its values of inclusivity, sovereignty, and peaceful co-existence (Tharoor, 2012). India's contributions to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and its outreach to Pacific Island states further expand its institutional footprint.

4. Maritime Power and Connectivity Initiatives

India's maritime strategy underscores its aspirations as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Initiatives such as the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) and the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine articulate India's vision of maritime cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs

[MEA], 2015). Under the Indo-Pacific strategy, investments in port infrastructure, coastal surveillance, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) collaborations reinforce India's maritime engagement. Modi's 2014 ascension heralded a doctrinal renaissance, infusing foreign policy with "Neighborhood First," Act East, and Indo-Pacific centrality. Rejecting non-alignment's ambivalence, Modi championed "multi-alignment": engaging all while aligning selectively.

The "Act East Policy" (2014 ASEAN Summit) dynamized its predecessor, emphasizing action over optics. Connectivity surged—India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (progressing toward 2028 completion), Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Corridor. Trade with ASEAN quadrupled to \$150 billion by 2025, with defense ties via ADMM-Plus and counterterrorism co-chairing (2024-2027).

SAGAR, unveiled in 2015 during Modi's Mauritius visit, was visionary. Its five pillars—respect for sovereignty via UNCLOS; resource sharing; capacity-building; sustainable use; disaster response—framed India as Indian Ocean Region's (IOR) stabilizer. Operationalized through 200+ warship deployments, patrol vessel gifts (Seychelles, Mauritius), and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR, 2018) in Gurugram, coordinating 25 nations against piracy and trafficking. Building on SAGAR, IPOI (2019 East Asia Summit) proposed seven pillars: maritime security; marine resources; ocean ecology; human development; disaster resilience; science/technology; trade/connectivity. It operationalized "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), syncing with Quad visions. By 2022, 17 pillars refined it, with Australia partnering on disaster management.



MAHASAGAR (2025), evolving SAGAR, globalized the vision—"Mahasagar" evoking oceanic vastness. It integrates Global South priorities: countering BRI debt traps via alternative financing (e.g., Chabahar with Iran/Afghanistan), blue economy (\$100 billion potential), and climate adaptation. Announced amid 2025 Quad Summit, it pledges \$50 billion in IOR infrastructure by 2030. These doctrines interweave: Act East ensures ASEAN centrality; SAGAR/IPOI/MAHASAGAR secure seas. Modi's 100+ foreign visits, "Vishwa Bandhu" rhetoric, and G20 presidency (2023) amplified them, hosting Voice of Global South Summits. Economically, FTAs with UAE/Australia (2022), ongoing with EU, diversify from RCEP abstention. Critically, doctrines preserve autonomy: no mutual defense pacts, emphasis on "inclusive" order welcoming China rhetorically. Yet, actions—border infra (\$10 billion post-Galwan)—betoken hedging.

Policy Articulations and Strategic Frameworks

Act East Policy

Originally evolved from the Look East Policy, Act East represents a more proactive engagement with Southeast and East Asia. Announced in 2014, it prioritizes economic, cultural, and strategic linkages with ASEAN member states, Japan, and beyond (Saha, 2020). India's infrastructure projects in Myanmar, trilateral highway initiatives, and digital connectivity plans exemplify this policy's implementation. India-

ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2022) anchors ASEAN centrality via EAS, ARF, ADMM-Plus. Act East boosted connectivity (e.g., India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway) and security (co-chairing counterterrorism 2024-2027). Maritime exercises and \$100 billion trade target by 2025 underscore economic pillar.

The Quad and Security Partnerships

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (India, United States, Japan, Australia) has evolved from a declaratory dialogue to an emerging platform for practical cooperation on maritime security, logistics, and technology. Revived in 2017, Quad (India, U.S., Japan, Australia) evolved from tsunami diplomacy (2004) to countering China's assertiveness without targeting it explicitly. India leverages Quad for maritime domain awareness, vaccines (2021), infrastructure via B3W/Partnership for Global Infrastructure (2021), and critical tech like 5G, clean energy, cyber, and HADR, aligning with India's strategic autonomy—refusing militarization while enhancing interoperability (e.g., COMCASA with U.S.). Trade within Quad reached \$500 billion annually by 2025. While deliberately non-militaristic in formal articulation, Quad exercises and dialogues signal normative convergence on a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific (Varma, 2021). India's participation reflects its intent to balance China's influence while maintaining strategic autonomy.

India's Indo-Pacific Vision Documents

In recent years, India has articulated its vision for the Indo-Pacific through official statements that emphasize rules-based order, ASEAN centrality, connectivity, and development cooperation (MEA, 2019). India's strategic documents underscore that its Indo-Pacific engagement is not targeted against any country but is aimed at maintaining peace and shared prosperity



India's Multilateral Engagements in the Region

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): India's partnership with ASEAN is a cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy. ASEAN's centrality in regional architecture, from the East Asia Summit to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), offers India a platform for normative leadership and conflict management (Kapila, 2017). India's trade agreements and cultural diplomacy reinforce these ties.

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC): BIMSTEC links South Asia and Southeast Asia, serving as a bridge between SAARC limitations and ASEAN engagement. India's leadership within BIMSTEC reflects its intent to foster regional integration and counterbalance China's BRI projects that risk debt dependencies in South Asian states (Pant, 2020).

India-Pacific Islands Engagements: India's diplomatic outreach to Pacific Island countries—through development assistance, climate initiatives, and fisheries cooperation—reflects a broadened Indo-Pacific engagement (Nayak & Langenhove, 2021). These engagements demonstrate India's intent to be recognized as a partner beyond its immediate periphery.

Strategic Partnerships and Bilateral Relations

In the 21st century, India's Indo-Pacific engagements have been propelled by robust strategic partnerships, particularly with the United States, Japan, Australia, and a complex dynamic with China, reflecting evolving geopolitical realities marked by great-power competition and regional stability imperatives.

India–United States relations have deepened significantly since the early 2000s through foundational defense agreements like COMCASA (2018) and BECA (2020), joint military exercises such as Malabar, and aligned concerns over China's assertiveness in the region (Pant & Joshi, 2020). The United States increasingly regards India as a cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy, fostering collaboration in maritime security, advanced technology transfers, and multilateral governance frameworks to counterbalance revisionist influences.

The India–Japan partnership, solidified in this era, hinges on shared priorities for infrastructure connectivity, free and fair trade, and upholding a rules-based international order. Their cooperation manifests in co-financed development projects across Southeast Asia, Quad initiatives, and Japan's backing for India's northeastern infrastructure, highlighting strategic synergies that enhance economic and security resilience.

India–Australia ties have gained momentum in the 21st century via intensified defense pacts, educational exchanges, and maritime domain awareness efforts, institutionalized through annual summits and joint exercises. Australia's commitment to the Quad framework further aligns the duo on critical security outlooks, amplifying their joint role in fostering a stable Indo-Pacific.

In contrast, India–China relations in the 21st century blend persistent economic interdependence with profound rivalry and mistrust, fueled by border disputes like those in Ladakh (2020). While multilateral cooperation endures, strategic competition has driven India to diversify partnerships, making the delicate balance of engagement and deterrence a pivotal challenge for regional equilibrium.

Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Policy

India's Indo-Pacific Policy grapples with several interconnected challenges. Foremost is balancing strategic autonomy—India's core foreign policy principle—which complicates alliances with major powers, as it avoids entrapment in binding security commitments amid intensifying great-power competition (Fravel, 2019). Resource constraints further hinder progress, with military modernization, logistical capabilities, and the defense industrial base lagging behind China and others due to fiscal and technological limits. Economic vulnerabilities, including trade imbalances, supply chain dependencies, and investment competition, undermine the sustainability of strategic initiatives. Finally, a trust deficit with regional partners, especially Southeast Asian states wary of hegemonic rivalries, demands sustained confidence-building measures and consistent engagement to bolster India's leadership aspirations.

Opportunities and Future Trajectories

India's Indo-Pacific Policy is poised for advancement through promising opportunities and evolving trajectories that capitalize on its strengths in connectivity, institutional leadership, and development cooperation. In the realm of digital and energy connectivity, India is forging deeper ties via digital diplomacy, cybersecurity collaborations, and renewable energy partnerships, exemplified by strategic investments in regional digital corridors and green energy infrastructure that promote sustainable

development and resilient strategic linkages. Furthermore, India's rising institutional leadership—highlighted by its G20 presidency—positions it to exert normative influence on critical global issues like climate change, trade governance, and technology standards, while advancing inclusive narratives of equitable development tailored to Indo-Pacific dynamics. Complementing these efforts, expanding development cooperation through concessional credit lines, capacity-building programs, and humanitarian aid initiatives bolsters India's soft power, particularly among Pacific and Indian Ocean littoral states, thereby extending its diplomatic footprint and fostering long-term regional partnerships.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a paradigm of strategic evolution shaped by global power shifts, regional complexities, and national aspirations. The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central theatre where India's strategic interests converge with security, economic, and normative objectives. India's policy articulations—embodied in Act East, Indo-Pacific visions, and multilateral engagements—convey an ambition to influence regional order while preserving strategic autonomy.

While challenges persist in capability constraints, geopolitical competition, and resource limitations, India's multi-vector diplomacy and institutional engagements equip it to navigate the dynamic Indo-Pacific landscape. India's role as a stabilizing and constructive actor in the region depends on deepening partnerships, bolstering economic integration, and advancing inclusive governance frameworks.

In essence, India's Indo-Pacific strategy articulates a vision of partnership, coexistence, and shared prosperity. Its successful realization will depend on pragmatic policy execution, adaptive strategy, and sustained diplomatic engagement.

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