

The Indo-Pacific Geopolitics and India's Strategy of Multi-Alignment

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Abstract:

The Indo-Pacific region spans the Indian and Pacific Oceans, serving as the epicentre of 21st century geopolitics due to its economic weight and strategic rivalries. It accounts for over 60% of global GDP and population, with critical sea lanes like the Strait of Malacca carrying 40% of World's exports. The region is dominated by US-China rivalry and competition. Beijing's warship deployments from Yellow Sea to South China Sea prompting Taiwan warning in late 2025. India supports the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, through which 55% of its trade passes. New Delhi deepens Quad ties and bilateral relations with countries of the region for regional stability and freedom of navigation. It plays a pivotal role in the Quad alliance as a counterbalance to China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing maritime security, strategic autonomy, without formal military commitments.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Multi-alignment, Strategic interests, Malacca Dilemma, Geo- political

Introduction

The phrase 'Indo-Pacific' is connected with the term marine biological region traditionally, but in contemporary times for the past 15 years, it has been developed as a key geopolitical development of strategic interests. The Indo-Pacific region is a vast maritime region connecting the Indian ocean and Pacific Ocean¹. The ocean area spans from East Africa to Oceania. The area has become a critical area and also became significant focal point of geopolitical strategy and tension. The area covers half of the world's population. The Indo-Pacific region spans the Indian Ocean's tropical waters through the western and central Pacific, including seas around Indonesia, the Bay of Bengal, and up to Japan and Oceania. Indo-Pacific encompasses diverse features like the Andaman Sea, Philippine Sea, and Sunda Shelf, connecting major oceans. The area is now central to geopolitics. The Indo-Pacific is a key arena for geopolitical competition, economic ties, and security challenges, particularly between China and U.S.-led alliances. It is a major area of strategic, economic, and technological competition, often involving maritime security, territorial disputes, and shifting alliances. The area is a focal point of 21st century geopolitics. This maritime region includes the Strait of Malacca, the major trade route of the world. It is characterized by strategic competition, particularly with the rise of China. The countries like the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia also trying it for a free and open region. The Indo-Pacific geopolitics centres on intensifying U.S.-China rivalry over maritime influence, resources, and maritime routes. The security architecture of Indo-Pacific region due to growing influence of China is become important for India and its foreign policy. To counter Chinese assertiveness over this area multi-alignment strategies are emerging bilaterally and multilaterally. U.S.-China competition put risks in key areas like South China Sea, Taiwan, and Straits of Malacca. In this oceanic region, control of sea lanes of communication shapes trade and energy security. USA focuses on maintaining a rules-based order, often seen as a counter to Chinese influence. China is a dominant, often assertive, player in the region ASEAN- A central, yet sometimes divided, group in

regional dynamics. The EU, France, Germany, and Canada have developed, or are developing, specific Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific frames broader regional strategies for powers like US and India., linking trade routes from the Malacca Strait eastward.

The Strait of Malacca is a roughly 930 kilo meter long, narrow waterway connecting the Indian Ocean (Andaman Sea) and the Pacific Ocean (South China Sea), running between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. It is a narrow maritime chokepoint linking the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea for energy imports and trade. It is one of the world's busiest and most critical maritime shipping lanes, handling 40-50 per cent of global trade and serving as a vital energy route for China, Japan and India. It acts as the primary and shortest sea routes between the middle east, Europe and Asia. It roughly carries 60,000 ships daily. As there is heavy dependence on the Strait of Malacca by China, the concept Malacca Dilemma stems. The Malacca Dilemma refers to China's strategic vulnerability due to its heavy reliance on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports and trade. Coined by President Hu Jintao in 2003, it highlights risks like naval blockades, piracy, or disruptions by powers such as the US, which could choke off over 80 per cent of China's imported oil. This dilemma fuels tensions, pushing China toward assertive maritime claims and rivalry with India and the US across island chains. Myanmar's instability hampers alternatives like CMEC, sustaining vulnerability amid US-led containment. As of 2025, naval buildup and BRI investments continue, but the strait endures as a flashpoint. Beijing prioritizes Southeast Asia to address its 'Malacca Dilemma', Washington has made alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Beijing pursues pipeline diversification via the Belt and Road Initiative, including routes from Russia, Central Asia, Pakistan (China Pakistan Economic Corridor), and Myanmar (China Myanmar Economic Corridor) to bypass the strait. It builds "String of Pearls" ports in the Indian Ocean for refuelling and influence, while expanding its navy for sea lane protection. Energy efficiency, stockpiles, and ties with Asean nations also mitigate risks, though full independence remains elusive.

Maritime territorial dispute in South China Sea is a regular feature in recent time. Tensions escalated with China's land reclamation since 2013. The acts of China are being criticized for environmental damage and militarization. Tensions in the South China Sea disputes have intensified in 2026 when China blocked access to Scarborough Shoal and expanded its infrastructure. The South China Sea maritime dispute involves overlapping territorial claims by China, the Philippine, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan over islands, reefs, and waters rich in resources and trade routes. China asserts historic rights over roughly 90% of the sea via its nine-dash line. It built artificial islands and military outposts on reefs like Fiery Cross and Mischief Reef China's "nine-dash line" asserts vast historic rights which was ruled invalid by a 2016 international tribunal under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The 2016 ruling invalidated nine-dash line noting China's reef damage and unsafe conduct. Beijing is not obeying this tribunal's rule. China claims nearly the entire sea via nine-dash line. It has built artificial islands on Spratlys claiming around 3,200 acres. China enforces fishing moratoriums and uses militia vessels. Recent 2025 incident at Scarborough Shoal escalated tensions between China and Philippines, marked by aggressive manoeuvres, collisions, and increased patrols. As of March 2026, ASEAN aims for a binding Code of Conduct by year-end. On March 15, 2026 Philippines rejected China's full sovereignty claim on these territories. The joint US-Philippines-Japan is still continuing.

External involvement in Indo-Pacific Region has been seen due to China's assertiveness in this sea area. US conducts freedom of navigation operations and warns China, US is now focusing on Indo-Pacific alliances. India has put its support behind the notion of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', other countries with similar objectives are viewing this as an avenue to develop a more meaningful strategic partnership with India. The

changing geopolitical circumstances led India to adopt a more proactive approach. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is impacting relationships with countries in the region, including Quad member states, ASEAN countries and countries in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). In recent years, India is playing a role beyond the Indian Ocean.

Key Strategic Dynamics

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific framework has emerged as a defining element of India's foreign policy. The Indo-Pacific concept has provided India with a strategic blueprint for its broader foreign policy agenda. India maintains a keen interest in this region due to its strategic, economic, and legal interests in South China Sea, despite not being a claimant state². It focuses on multi-alignment and reshapes norms. New Delhi supports freedom of navigation adherence to UNCLOS, a rule-based order under the Law of the Sea, and stability in the Indo-Pacific and the 2016 arbitral award against China's expansive claims³. While deepening ties with claimants like the Philippines and Vietnam to counterbalance Beijing it is avoiding direct confrontation with China. Roughly 50-55 % of India's trade with the Indo-Pacific passes through or near the South China Sea, making open sea-lanes vital for its economy and emerging security. India does not take sides on sovereignty claims but insists that all disputes be settled peacefully under international law, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It criticizes any unilateral use of force or coercion to change the status quo. U.S priorities for securing first island chain and counter militarization; China tries to mitigate Malacca vulnerability and to control sea lanes.

India's Strategy of Multi-alignments

India's foreign policy has traditionally been guided by a commitment to non-alignment and maintaining strategic partnerships. India has shifted from non-alignment to multi-alignment. From 1990s onwards, India's stance towards East and Southeast Asia has evolved considerably, moving from a more passive, observant role under the "Look East Policy" to a dynamic, engaged position under the "Act East Policy". Regional forums play a central role in managing tensions, fostering cooperation on issues like maritime security and supply chains. India's active participation reflects its strategic interests amid border frictions with China. India is building partnerships with likeminded countries in the region. It has made alignment with countries such as Australia, Japan and the United States. The key alignments of India are with QUAD, ASEAN, IPEF, Japan and Australia.

- **QUAD (the U.S, India, Japan, Australia)**

The Quad partnership of India with the U.S, Japan, Australia is the key factor for India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The Quad focuses on maritime security, counter terrorism, and exercises like Malabar to deter China, despite occasional political frictions. The Quad drives maritime exercises, infrastructure and technical cooperation. India's role in QUAD (with the US, Japan, and Australia) by advocating for a rule-based order, freedom of navigation, and UNCLOS in the South China Sea, while avoiding direct military confrontation to preserve strategic autonomy⁴. India avoids 'securitizing' the Quad into an Asian NATO, rejecting alliances that limit flexibility. It uses the forum for multi-alignment, deepening bilateral ties with member countries. Through Quad platforms, India amplifies concerns over China's coercive actions, supporting SCS claimants like the Philippines and Vietnam indirectly via diplomacy and capacity-building. Strategic framework of the Quad is that it promotes a free and open Indo-Pacific against coercion, with plans for AI and cyber cooperation. QUAD also has taken many maritime initiatives. It advances initiatives like IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness) for monitoring grey-zone activities, with India contributing assets and training despite focusing on the Indian Ocean. Maritime exercises (e.g., Malabar) enhance interoperability, indirectly deterring

SCS tensions. India has not yet conducted a formal Quad-wide naval exercise inside the South China Sea proper, but it does participate in Quad-linked exercises in the broader Indo-P including nearby waters and conducts bilateral naval drills with key South China Sea -adjacent partners such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The Malabar series, which is the core Quad maritime exercise, has so far been held in the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, or Western Pacific, not in the contested South China Sea itself. India avoids QUAD patrols in South China Sea, unlike US-Japan-Australia trilaterals, to sidestep escalation. Diplomatic Stance like QUAD foreign ministers including India have repeatedly flagged SCS as an 'issue of great concern', opposing unilateral changes by force or coercion, as in the July 2025 Washington meeting. Joint statements emphasize maritime security and de-escalation without naming China explicitly, aligning with India's Act East Policy. India reins in Quad from overt SCS operations, prioritizing Indo-Pacific stability over alliances.

QUAD-linked exercises-

Joint military exercises among the Quad members enhance their collective military capabilities.

- **Exercise Malabar-** It is the principal multilateral naval drill among the four Quad members. Malabar-2024 and Malabar -2025 were held off the Bay of Bengal or in the Western Pacific, focusing on anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and at-sea replenishment. These exercises send a strong political signal about 'free and open Indo-Pacific' cohesion, even though they are not conducted within the actual South China Sea dispute zone. By combining Quad-scale exercises (Malabar, plus newer drills such as Sea- Dragon-2026, which India joined with U.S., Japan, and Australia in Guam) with bilateral South China Sea -area drills with Vietnam and the Philippines, India signals it can project into the South China Sea periphery while maintaining a calibrated posture towards China.
- **Maritime info-sharing-** For the security purposes, India has adopted maritime info-sharing to deter coercion and to builds capabilities. For the economic aspect, it focusses on supply chains to boost exports.

Challenges and Limits

India balances QUAD engagement with non-alignment, wary of provoking China amid border disputes, limiting commitments to SCS hotspots. As of early 2026, QUAD remains diplomatic on SCS, with India central to broader Indo-Pacific visions like SAGAR and MAHASAGAR doctrines, this cautious approach sustains QUAD cohesion while advancing India's net security provider role.

- **ASEAN Engagement:**

ASEAN is a cornerstone of India's 'Act East Policy' and its broader Indo-Pacific foreign policy. While ASEAN plays a pivotal role in promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific through its 'centrality' principle and initiatives like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), framing the region as a zone of cooperation, emphasizing peace, neutrality, and economic ties. It encourages major powers to respect ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the Treaty of Amity and cooperation, to manage competition. Active participation in ASEAN-India Summits, East Asia Summits, and Defence Minister's Meetings. By designating 2026 as the ASEAN-India 'Year of Maritime Cooperation' and a 2026-2030 Plan of Action, New Delhi is institutionalizing a deeper, rules -oriented presence in the wider pacific, including the South China Sea periphery. India's evolving maritime doctrine like 'MAHASAGAR' emphasizes on protecting offshore economic assets, safeguards Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and capacity building with ASEAN partners.

- **India's Act East Policy:** Introduced in the year 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it focusses a proactive, strategic, and security-oriented framework along with economic growth. It aims to deepen relations with ASEAN, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region. It is an Indo-Pacific strategy for a stable, non-dominated Southeast Asian maritime space. It is fostering economic, cultural, and infrastructural development particularly in India's Northeast region. The main focus area is the economic integration. It is trying to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia, integrating with regional supply chains and to boost investment. India is also focussing strategic and security cooperation, infrastructural connectivity and cultural & People-to-People links. With a focus on enhancing economic cooperation, promoting regional engagement and fostering cultural exchange with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, the Act East Policy envisions a Viksit Bharat. Focussing on the national development, the policy has profound significance and implications for the Northeast region of India. The Northeast region shares 98 percent of its border with Myanmar, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan and only 2 percent with India's mainland. This region acts as a centre of geo-economic and cultural significance for India. The policy has a strong commitment to strengthen social and cultural ties with neighbouring countries. The Northeast region has longstanding historical and cultural connections with Southeast Asia, particularly with Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. These ties, which date back centuries, are rooted in shared traditions, religions, and customs. They have deep cultural affinities in the past. A broader vision that seeks to deepen ties with the fast-growing economies of East Asia while revitalizing the Northeast's role as a bridge between India and its dynamic neighbours.
- **ASEAN-India 2025 summit:** The 22nd ASEAN- India Summit was held on October 26, 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Summit focus on strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership through enhanced connectivity, maritime cooperation, and technology, marking 2025 as the ASEAN-India Year of Tourism. The leaders welcomed the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2026- 2030) and designated 2026 as the "ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation".
- **Security Partnerships:** Increased maritime exercises with Vietnam and Défense equipment credit lines. India has elevated ties with the Philippines to a strategic partnership, including joint naval patrols in 2025, BrahMos missile sales, deliveries from 2024, and offers of helicopters. Vietnam receives naval assets like a gifted corvette (2023) and joint energy projects, bolstering deterrence. These align with Quad advocacy for a rule-based order. In early 2026, Indian Navy deployments to Singapore- part of Eastern Fleet operations near SCS-signal heightened maritime presence amid Philippines-China standoffs. PM Modi designated 2026 as ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation, focusing on joint exercises and domain awareness. India reaffirms UNCLOS support, rejecting third-party limits on its activities.
- **Core policies:** India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and Act East Policy drive engagement, evolving into MAHASAGAR for broader maritime outreach and ASEAN Défense pacts like those with Vietnam and Malaysia⁵. These integrate security, trade, and connectivity, with India chairing IORA (2025-27) to boost regional cooperation⁶. India- advocates for an inclusive, free and open region, SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region. India views the South China Sea as critical for regional stability, energy security, and preventing spillover into the Indian Ocean and China border tensions post- Galwan ²⁰²⁰. Economic pursuits include ONGC Videsh's oil exploration in Vietnam's blocks, extended into recent years despite Chinese objections. The Act East Policy drives this, evolving to emphasize security cooperation without direct confrontation. India supports

UNCLOS, peaceful resolution, freedom of navigation, shifted to endorse 2016 ruling in ties with Philippines. India is the current chair of IORA for two years⁷.

- **Policy Approach** India balances assertiveness with caution, avoiding alliances that provoke China while advocating ASEAN centrality and multilateral forums. This nuanced stance positions New Delhi as a stakeholder in Indo-Pacific stability, leveraging defence exports and exercises over direct involvement. The middle power like India navigates asymmetries for stability in this contested region.

- **The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)**

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), is a US led initiative launched in May 2022. It has 14 partner countries of Indo-Pacific region where India is also a member country. India is an active member focusing on pillars II, III, IV- Supply Chains, Clean Economy, Fair Economy framed by IPEF. This organization serves as a counterweight to China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region

- **India and Japan**

India, of its Quad partners, has the greatest degree of strategic trust in Tokyo. Geopolitically, both nations are committed to uphold the rule-based geo-political order. The India- Japan partnership significantly bolsters the Quad by enhancing defence interoperability, technology collaboration, and a shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Japan's pacific shield counters expansionism amid economic coercion from China. The country is a major investor in India. The areas of investment are the investment in key infrastructure projects. Both countries also have announced a wide range of joint ventures. Japan's first air force participation in India's multilateral drill 'Tarang Shakti' expanding Quad from naval exercise Malabar to air domain. Unmanned ground vehicles and UNICORN radio tech progress enable secure Quad logistics. These positioned India-Japan relations in Quad's 'Special Strategic' anchor for 2026 maritime goals.

- **India and Australia**

India and Australia ties lack the depth of partnership like India with other Quad members. But both nations share concerns about regional stability, maritime security and revisionist powers in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges:

1. **Limited Economic and military Capacity:** India faces significant strategic, economic and military hurdles in the area primarily due to China's assertive dominance and India's limited regional projection. India lacks a robust naval presence and alliances in this sea region. It is limited to occasional exercises. China's superior military capabilities and grey zone tactics further deter deeper Indian involvement. There are also resource constraints for India. India faces hurdles in effectively integrating its economy with the region due to complex trade agreements, regulatory barriers, and varying economic systems among countries.
2. **Geopolitical Competition:** China's assertiveness, including Belt and Road Initiative ports in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea claims, directly challenges India's influence and sea lanes. Balancing Quad partnerships with engagements in SCO and BRICS create ambiguity, reducing India's alignment reality. The region witnesses intense competition between China and the United States for influence and to control the region. As both the countries are major powers, it is a challenge for India in maintain a balancing approach. Delays in infrastructure projects hinder the pace of integration.

3. **Maritime Security:** The Indo-Pacific region encompasses vital sea lanes. India faces challenges due to territorial disputes, terrorism and piracy.
4. **Lack of robust connectivity:** India lacks the infrastructure connectivity. Delay in connectivity poses challenges to enhance regional connectivity.

Conclusion:

India's foreign policy is trying to build strategic partnership with like-minded countries and the regional organization in the Indo-Pacific region. This region offers immense economic potential to India. Collaborative security initiatives and military exercises with regional partners enhance India's security cooperation and helps in strengthening its capability to address shared security challenges. Despite opportunities the country is also facing many challenges to counter China's assertiveness.

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