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OPINION

India's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy: Navigating Geopolitical Shifts and Strengthening Strategic Autonomy

Imran Khurshid*



India has consistently supported the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific, with inclusivity, openness, and centrality of ASEAN at the heart of this vision. Historically, India's strategic and policy elites have had a continental mindset shaped by geopolitical and geostrategic challenges from China to the north and Pakistan to the west.¹ Consequently, land-based threats have dominated India's strategic thinking, leaving its maritime vision relatively underdeveloped. However, over the past decade, China's growing strategic ambitions—particularly its military buildup and geopolitical initiatives such as the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road and various other dual use infrastructure projects in the region—have prompted New Delhi to

reassess some of its strategic priorities in the maritime domain. As a result, New Delhi has significantly redirected its attention towards its maritime domain, prioritizing the enhancement of maritime infrastructure in strategically positioned island nations, critical maritime chokepoints, and smaller coastal states within the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in addition to the Caribbean region.²

With 90 per cent of India's trade passing through maritime channels, the uninterrupted flow of goods via Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is critical to the country's economic stability and to its global rise. India's reliance on energy imports emphasizes the importance of free and open Indo-Pacific region, as disruptions and interruptions

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could have far-reaching consequences on its economy. Strategic thinkers such as K.M. Pannikar have long emphasized the significance of the Indian Ocean to India's security, seeing it as a crucial component of India's freedom and prosperity.³

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue speech in Singapore was a watershed moment in India's Indo-Pacific involvement, officially outlining the country's vision for this region for the first time. Modi emphasized "inclusiveness," "openness," and "ASEAN centrality" as guiding principles while expanding India's conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific's geographical stretch, extending from the west coast of the US to the east coast of Africa to include places such as the Arabian Sea, Gulf States, and Indian Ocean islands. This extended geographical region was not covered in the previous definitions, which saw this region extending from Hollywood to Bollywood, excluding the western Indian Ocean and the important Gulf region, which is very important for India's geo-strategic and geo-economic interests. In this speech, Modi underlined the importance of a rules-based international order founded on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and adherence to international law. He also emphasized the necessity of open navigation and

unhindered commerce, noting that regional prosperity and security are dependent on commitment to international law.⁴

Modi's Indo-Pacific vision is captured by the five S's in Hindi: *Sammaan* (respect), *Samvad* (conversation), *Sahyog* (co-operation), *Shanti* (peace), and *Samridhi* (prosperity).⁵ His speech discreetly criticized China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, arguing for peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with the international norms. Modi also stated that connectivity initiatives should be based on sovereignty, transparency, and financial accountability, implicitly criticizing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, New Delhi has remained consistent in its opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), citing sovereignty concerns over its passage through Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK). Additionally, India's criticism of the BRI projects is based on the premise that connectivity initiatives should empower nations rather than be tools for coercive tactics or unsustainable debt traps.⁶

Besides, the notion of 'ASEAN centrality' is critical to India's Indo-Pacific vision. It geostrategically prioritizes Southeast Asian nations and places them at the center of India's regional engagement. This

approach aims to keep ASEAN united in the face of China's attempts to divide and exploit differences among its member states. This principle implicitly seeks to limit China's dominance in the strategic environment of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the inclusive aspect of India's Indo-Pacific vision emphasizes the region's "geographic breadth," which spans enormous waters and diverse countries. Geostrategically and geopolitically, the Indo-Pacific construct provides a framework for dealing with China's growing aggressiveness, maintaining a balance of power, encouraging cooperation among like-minded countries and ensuring peace and prosperity in this extended region.

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)

India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) serve as guiding frameworks for India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Modi introduced the concept of SAGAR during his visit to Mauritius in 2015. Under this framework, India's objective is to work with partners to ensure a stable, safe, and secure Indian Ocean region. By collaborating on information and intelligence sharing, coastal surveillance, infrastructure development, and capability

building, New Delhi seeks to boost its economic and security connections with its maritime neighbors while also assisting them in developing their marine security capabilities.

SAGAR includes five important aspects: (i) protecting India's interests and standing as a preferred security partner in the region; (ii) facilitating India's contribution to augmenting maritime security capabilities in the region; (iii) promoting peace and security through collaborative efforts and collective action; (iv) facilitating integrated sustainable development of the region, including the ocean economy; and (v) ensuring that the primary responsibility for peace, stability, and prosperity lies on the countries of this region. SAGAR illustrates India's commitment to a secure, stable, and prosperous Indian Ocean region, vital for its economic and strategic interests.⁷

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), introduced by Modi during the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019, seeks to operationalize India's Indo-Pacific vision. The initiative's seven pillars—maritime security, marine ecology, disaster risk reduction, sustainable use of marine resources, capacity

building, scientific and technology cooperation, and trade connectivity—provide a comprehensive framework for engagement with like-minded countries. The IPOI emphasizes the rules-based maritime system and the interdependence of maritime security and economic stability.⁸

Moreover, India actively participates in a number of regional mechanisms to strengthen its Indo-Pacific engagement, including the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the recently launched Colombo security conclave. India is also establishing ties with Pacific Island states through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), solidifying its Indo-Pacific influence.⁹

Strengthening Strategic Autonomy

The Indo-Pacific construct frees India's strategic discourse and mindset from the narrow confinement of sub-continental framework. Previously, India's continental outlook limited its strategic vision to a largely land-centric worldview, limiting its ability to pursue a broader and more integrated approach to its security

objectives, particularly in the maritime domain. It also inhibited New Delhi from developing new partnerships and effectively pursuing its expanding national interests. By adopting the Indo-Pacific framework, New Delhi has realigned its strategic priorities to reflect its growing global power and influence in the region. As Jaishankar stated at the 2019 Indian Ocean Conference in the Maldives, the construct of Indo-Pacific is a logical extension of India's Act East policy, signaling a strategic departure from South Asia's conventional boundaries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019a).

This concept imbues Indian foreign policy with greater realism and pragmatism, allowing New Delhi to move beyond the binary thinking of the Cold War era, when global affairs were viewed through strict ideological lenses. By adopting the Indo-Pacific paradigm, New Delhi abandons its Cold War worldview and adjusts to the complex geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century. It provides New Delhi with more options to engage with like-minded countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, allowing it to effectively counter China's expanding influence. This framework is crucial to India's external balancing strategy since it allows for greater flexibility in

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strengthening partnerships with key partners. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific framework enables India to strengthen its regional partnerships by developing alternative supply chains, reducing economic reliance on China, and boosting its R&D and technological capabilities. This is consistent with the worldwide trend of de-risking and, in some critical sectors, decoupling from China, which is motivated by concerns that Beijing may use supply chain dependencies for geostrategic leveraging during any strategic vulnerability or potential geopolitical crisis in the future.¹⁰

This framework not only provides a means for dealing with the challenges posed by an assertive China, but it also elevates India's status as a major global player capable of handling broader global challenges and obligations. By embracing the Indo-Pacific vision, India positions itself as a key player in its efforts to mitigate global challenges such as climate change, enhance public health systems, and ensure delivery of global public goods, reaffirming its commitment to international governance. This framework strengthens India's position as a preferred security partner and first responder in the Indian Ocean region. These roles are critical for sustaining regional stability and addressing security challenges, which range from

maritime piracy to humanitarian aid and disaster relief activities. By taking on these obligations, India raises its regional profile and establishes itself as a reliable power in maintaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹

Because of the rapidly evolving balance of power in this region and India's increasing prominence on the global stage, India plays a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific strategies of major nations, such as the United States, the European Union, Japan, and several others. The significance of India in this context is such that no nation's Indo-Pacific strategy can be developed without acknowledging India's crucial role in it. In fact, the exclusion of India would make any country's Indo-Pacific strategy fundamentally insufficient. Furthermore, India's position at the heart of this strategic geography of the Indian Ocean region makes it critical to any nation's Indo-Pacific strategy, emphasizing its critical role in shaping and addressing the region's changing geopolitical dynamics.¹²

Finally, the Modi government has pursued a pragmatic and adaptive foreign policy, describing 'strategic autonomy' as the ability to take independent decisions that are consistent with India's national objectives. The strategic reinterpretation of this concept

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focuses on widening India's strategic choices in an increasingly dynamic global strategic environment. As part of its Indo-Pacific policy, New Delhi seeks a geographically inclusive and geo-strategically oriented framework to offset China's dominance. This strategy emphasizes closer engagement with like-minded partners who share a similar vision for the Indo-Pacific. India's geostrategic and cooperative approach strives to maximize geopolitical advantages, strengthen geo-economic security, and raise its global profile.¹³

This paradigm strengthens India's strategic autonomy, allowing more flexible and independent pursuit of national objectives while widening its foreign policy options. It prepares New Delhi to manage the rapidly changing turbulent global order with greater confidence and resilience. In conclusion, the Indo-Pacific concept signifies a significant shift in India's strategic orientation, contributing to its growing influence while increasing its strategic autonomy. By adopting this framework, India not only strategically counters China's expanding influence, but also positions itself as a crucial player in influencing the region's geopolitical and geo-economic landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India's emerging Indo-Pacific strategy indicates a

substantial shift in its foreign and strategic policy, motivated by the need to navigate a complicated and rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. New Delhi has rebalanced its strategic priorities to address the emerging challenges in the region and beyond, particularly those posed by an assertive and aggressive China, by using a geographically inclusive and geo-strategically focused framework. This change demonstrates India's commitment to a rules-based international order, regional stability, and collaborative frameworks with like-minded countries. Through projects like SAGAR and IPOI, India would not only be able to strengthen its maritime capabilities, but also to promote itself as a dependable security partner and a prominent advocate of sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific. It would strengthen India's strategic autonomy, allowing it to pursue its national goals independently while deepening ties with like-minded partners. As a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific strategy, India's proactive approach to addressing common concerns ranging from maritime security to climate change strengthens its position as a key global player. By balancing geopolitical imperatives and geo-economic opportunities, India would be able to exert its influence in defining the Indo-Pacific's

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developing dynamics, protecting its strategic and economic interests while contributing to regional and global stability. ■

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