



Research Paper

Partnership as a Pillar of India's Regional Strategy

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Abstract.

The Shangri-la statement painted a picture of India's global and regional priorities. It involved partnerships and collaboration with countries in the region and the globe. The statement served as a message to smaller countries to cooperate without taking sides, thus pulling them into the Sino-India or US rivalry. In a way, India portrayed to the smaller and middle powers that it could take up leadership to stabilise the region through cooperation and partnerships. India's association with the QUAD countries and treating them as natural partners for the Indo-Pacific partnerships shows its resolve for a stable future. India focuses on partnerships to secure its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region and Indo-Pacific, thus laying the foundation of India's Global Leadership role.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, QUAD, Indian Ocean, US-China

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I. Introduction

India has always tried to take a position in the World Power structure for a long time. India being in one of the most troubled neighbourhoods of the world, it was necessary to form an all-inclusive strategy towards its neighbours. India has always been engaged in managing its relations with its neighbours rather than shaping its long-term objectives in the region and world power structure (Kumar, 2020, 56).

Recent years saw a considerable change in this aspect. Modi 2.0, with regional and global priorities in mind, was able to steer and shape relations with the two significant powers in the world- the US, China, and its neighbours. India has been trying their hand in asymmetric diplomacy and undoing its reputation as a regional bully or hegemon. The government's initiative to develop its relationship with its neighbours was portrayed by the invitation of all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nation leaders to the swearing-in ceremony. It was a significant step in developing its relations with its neighbours and Indian diplomacy.

The Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region are central to contemporary geopolitics, given their strategic importance as global trade arteries and security hotspots. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, this vast maritime expanse is home to critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) facilitating nearly 70% of global trade (Mukherjee, 2021, 115). The region also harbours abundant natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and fisheries, making it a vital economic and strategic zone.

For India, the Indo-Pacific and IOR are geographic concepts and areas of primary strategic interest. Geopolitical rivalries, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the militarisation of the South China Sea have heightened India's strategic stakes. As a nation with a 7,500-kilometer-long coastline and significant maritime dependencies, India views the stability and security of this region as integral to its national security and economic development.

Several key factors drive India's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific and IOR. China's growing influence in the region, mainly through the String of Pearls strategy and its naval activities, poses significant challenges to India's traditional sphere of influence (Jain, 2020). With over 90% of its trade conducted by sea and critical energy imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait, India's economic security is deeply intertwined with the region's maritime stability. Moreover, India's historical connections with Southeast Asia, Africa, and other Indian Ocean littoral states provide a strong foundation for deeper regional integration and cooperation. In recent years, India has reoriented its foreign policy to prioritise the Indo-Pacific and IOR through dynamic and multifaceted partnerships. This shift reflects a realisation that no

single country can address the region's challenges alone. Collaborative frameworks that leverage shared interests and mutual strengths are essential for creating a sustainable and inclusive regional order.

India's Strategic Engagement in the Indo-Pacific and IOR

Proactive diplomacy, robust security initiatives, and a strong focus on economic connectivity characterise India's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific and IOR. India has adopted a multi-dimensional approach to advance its interests, recognising the interdependence of peace, prosperity, and partnerships in the region. Diplomatic efforts are driven by frameworks like the Act East Policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which emphasise engagement with Southeast Asia, the Pacific Island nations, and African coastal states. High-level visits, cultural exchanges, and intergovernmental dialogues have strengthened these ties. India's leadership in forums like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) further highlights its commitment to fostering regional collaboration.

Maritime security remains a cornerstone of India's engagement, given the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy actively participates in anti-piracy operations, search-and-rescue missions, and humanitarian assistance, demonstrating its resolve to ensure freedom of navigation and combat maritime threats (Mukherjee, 2020). Joint exercises such as MILAN and patrols with nations like Indonesia, France, and Australia underscore this commitment.

Economically, India promotes trade, investment, and infrastructure development to enhance regional connectivity. Collaborative projects like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), developed in partnership with Japan, provide sustainable alternatives to China's BRI. Investments in key ports such as Chabahar in Iran and collaborations with ASEAN highlight India's drive for economic integration.

India also engages actively with multilateral platforms such as the Quad, ASEAN, and IORA to address shared challenges and promote common goals. India champions a rules-based international order, sustainable development, and collective security through these platforms. Its participation in Quad-led initiatives like vaccine distribution and resilient supply chain projects further emphasises its role as a responsible global stakeholder.

Additionally, India is leveraging technological and environmental collaborations to strengthen its regional engagement. Joint efforts in renewable energy, blue economy initiatives, and disaster resilience highlight India's focus on addressing global challenges. The International Solar Alliance (ISA), an initiative led by India, exemplifies its leadership in sustainable development. Collectively, these efforts showcase India's holistic and proactive approach to fostering peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

India's Bilateral Partnerships

India's partnership with the United States has significantly expanded, especially under the Quad framework (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which emphasises shared values of democracy, rule of law, and freedom of navigation in international waters. Key defence agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) have facilitated greater military interoperability and enhanced strategic coordination between the two nations. Furthermore, the collaboration extends beyond defence, encompassing emerging technologies, clean energy, and resilient supply chains, underscoring the multifaceted nature of the partnership.

India's engagement with Japan is another critical element of its regional strategy. The partnership is characterised by robust economic collaboration and shared strategic objectives. Together, the two nations spearhead the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which aims to develop sustainable and inclusive infrastructure, offering an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, Japan's active involvement in India's infrastructure projects, such as high-speed rail development, signifies the deep economic integration and mutual trust underpinning the relationship. This cooperation extends to defence, with joint military exercises and strategic dialogues reinforcing the partnership's significance in maintaining regional stability.

Similarly, India's ties with Australia have evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership rooted in shared concerns over maritime security, climate change, and regional stability. The two nations conduct joint naval exercises such as AUSINDEX to bolster maritime domain awareness and operational coordination. Beyond defence, their collaboration extends to critical minerals, renewable energy, and educational exchanges, reflecting a broad-based relationship that aligns with India's vision of an inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Multilateral Engagements

India's multilateral engagements form a cornerstone of its regional strategy, highlighting its commitment to fostering collective security, sustainable development, and a rules-based order (Kumar & Verma, 2018). The Quad, comprising India, the US, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as a key platform for

addressing challenges like maritime security, infrastructure, and disaster response while promoting free and open seas aligned with India's interests in regional stability.

Initially formed in 2007, the Quad gained momentum only after its 2017 revival, driven by the Indo-Pacific's growing strategic importance and China's assertiveness (Das, 2021). It enables India to assume the role of a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean Region, enhancing security, fostering partnerships, and maintaining a rule-based, inclusive regional order. The Quad also strengthens India's defence, counter-terrorism, and maritime capabilities through joint efforts like patrols, information sharing, and technology exchange.

Amid shifting dynamics, the Quad counters China's aggression, particularly in the South China Sea, while addressing the "String of Pearls" strategy that challenges India's maritime sovereignty. Post-pandemic, the Quad offers India economic recovery prospects and opportunities in multilateral reforms, connectivity, and infrastructure.

Although China perceives the Quad as anti-China, India's engagement strengthens its strategic goals. However, balancing relations with China remains critical, given potential economic and cybersecurity risks. The Quad symbolises geopolitical collaboration, transcending traditional alliances, advancing shared principles of international law, navigation freedom, and peaceful dispute resolution in the Indo-Pacific.

India's ties with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) are central to its Act East policy, which underscores the importance of Southeast Asia in India's strategic calculus. These ties have evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership encompassing economic, cultural, and strategic elements. Economically, India has worked to deepen integration through Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), boosting trade and investment across industries. Strategically, India has partnered with ASEAN nations on critical issues such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and disaster management through mechanisms like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). Additionally, shared historical and cultural ties have facilitated people-to-people connections and enhanced regional cooperation.

India and ASEAN also collaborate on key connectivity projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which aims to strengthen regional trade and physical linkages. Initiatives to enhance digital connectivity, capacity-building programs, and renewable energy projects further underscore the multifaceted nature of this partnership (Sridharan, 2020). Collectively, these efforts highlight India's commitment to ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific region and its vision of a cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable regional architecture. As a founding member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), India has consistently championed regional collaboration on pressing issues such as maritime security, blue economy development, and disaster resilience. By leveraging its strategic location and maritime expertise, India has positioned itself as a key stakeholder in fostering stability and growth across the Indian Ocean littoral states (Ramesh, 2019). Collectively, these multilateral engagements reflect India's vision of an inclusive, cooperative, and resilient Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

Strategic Initiatives

India has launched several strategic initiatives to ensure its proactive engagement in the Indo-Pacific and IOR. Among these, the Act East Policy and the SAGAR Vision are pivotal frameworks encapsulating India's regional aspirations.

The Act East Policy, launched in 2014, represents a strategic shift in India's foreign policy, emphasising closer economic and cultural integration with Southeast Asian nations. This policy builds upon its predecessor, the Look East Policy, by adding a more action-oriented approach to fostering bilateral and multilateral partnerships. India has pursued various collaborations through this framework, including military exercises, joint development projects, and trade agreements (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). Key initiatives under the Act East Policy include strengthening physical connectivity through infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. These projects aim to enhance trade routes and provide seamless access to Southeast Asian markets, cementing India's role as a vital regional economic partner.

Complementing the Act East Policy, the SAGAR Vision (Security and Growth for All in the Region) underscores India's commitment to ensuring peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. This initiative focuses on fostering cooperation among Indian Ocean littoral states and addressing shared maritime challenges. Under SAGAR, India has enhanced its naval presence to combat non-traditional security threats like piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking (Ministry of Defence, 2019). It has also extended humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, showcasing its capacity as a responsible maritime power. Moreover, the SAGAR Vision aligns with India's broader efforts to promote a rules-based order and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean Region.

Together, the Act East Policy and SAGAR Vision reflect India's strategic commitment to fostering regional integration, ensuring maritime security, and promoting sustainable economic growth. These initiatives highlight India's proactive approach to shaping an inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

Challenges to India's Regional Strategy

India's strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (IOR) face significant challenges that require continuous efforts and adaptive strategies to overcome. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean profoundly challenges India's influence and strategic ambitions. Through its "String of Pearls" initiative, Beijing has developed a network of ports and infrastructure projects encircling India, including strategic assets in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar. These developments and the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) increasing regional deployments underscore China's intent to assert dominance over key maritime routes. India must navigate these dynamics carefully, balancing assertive countermeasures with cooperative engagements to prevent regional tensions from escalating.

Maritime security threats remain a persistent obstacle to stability in the region. Issues such as piracy, illegal fishing, human trafficking, and maritime terrorism challenge India's ability to safeguard its maritime borders and economic interests. The vastness of the Indian Ocean and the multiplicity of actors involved necessitate a collaborative approach. India's naval modernisation efforts and active participation in joint exercises like MILAN and Malabar are critical. Still, they must be complemented by sustained multilateral partnerships and technological investments to strengthen surveillance, intelligence-sharing, and rapid response capabilities.

Infrastructure gaps present another hurdle to India's regional strategy. While India has prioritised connectivity projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the Chabahar Port development, these initiatives often fall short of matching the scale, speed, and funding of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chandra, 2021, 17). Bureaucratic delays, funding constraints, and coordination challenges have slowed India's progress. To counterbalance China's infrastructure dominance, India must accelerate its project timelines, foster public-private partnerships, and leverage alliances with countries like Japan and the United States to pool resources and expertise.

These challenges highlight the complex environment in which India operates within the Indo-Pacific and IOR. Addressing them will require a combination of strategic foresight, strengthened partnerships, and an unwavering commitment to promoting a stable and inclusive regional order.

II. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, India's challenges in its homeland will be much more complex and intimidating compared to the last two decades. However, the primary policy must focus on ongoing engagement at all levels of politics and people to the levels of the people, building on the deep cultural ties that differ from India's relations with its neighbours.

Despite the regional conflict between India and China, the emergence of a powerful state on the Indian border affected India's relations with its neighbouring countries. Indian domestic politics has always influenced our regional policy. As with our neighbours, their domestic politics impacts their involvement with India. The size of India is an essential factor in how our neighbours view India and its policies. India occupies much of the world's territory, population, economic activities, resources, and South Asia. India, therefore, needs to be aware of its neighbours' insecurities in dealing with a large neighbour and should adhere to a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs. Similarly, neighbouring countries should ensure that their relations with other countries do not undermine the strategic interest in India.

The demarcation of India's external borders is yet to be completed. Resolving boundary disputes will pave the way for regional integration. Therefore, India must strive to resolve borders by establishing a border commission. Integrating India's regional economic and foreign policy remains a major challenge. Hence, India should refrain from jeopardising bilateral relations with short-term financial interests. Alternatively, India should strive for economic integration, which has helped countries overcome political tensions by building economic trust. The rediscovery of regionalism opened up opportunities for reconnection with its neighbours. Thus, communication must be continued vigil while security concerns are addressed with less expensive, more effective, and reliable technical measures. India's local policy should be based on the principles of the Gujral Doctrine. This will ensure that India and power are inseparable from the quality of its relations with its neighbours and there can be regional growth.

The Government of India's Neighborhood Policy is displayed in the phrase, 'Neighborhood First'. However, to fully realise this vision, India and other neighbouring countries must realise that whatever happens in one country will affect neighbouring countries.

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