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India's initiative towards the Indo-Pacific: China as a Geopolitical Challenge

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates India's Indo-Pacific talks, emphasizing on three major concepts that drive the country's new foreign policy strategy. The Indo-Pacific region provides several opportunities for India to create strategic relationships and handle regional strategic and security issues. These strategic alliances are critical to India's Indo-Pacific policy since they enable the country to significantly expand its strategic and diplomatic ties through collaborative collaborations on a variety of initiatives. China is progressively developing partnerships with island governments in the area, notably the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka; this has given China the appearance as a security provider, undermining India's alleged position as a security supplier. This situation has increased China-India competitiveness and created conflict in the marine sector. The geopolitical significance of these islands was overlooked for a long time in post-Cold War international politics. A comparable challenge is emerging in India's strategic thinking. This also underlines the growing importance of maritime security in India's diplomatic relations, which have previously been dominated by issues related to its continental boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Indo-Pacific, Geopolitical competition, Security, Quad, Global Power.

1. GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

"Great areas of historical debate emerge about whether—and when—the 'organic' unity of, in this case, the Indian Ocean as some kind of region was finally sundered by the political and economic changes wrought by the changes in the world economy." [1] The word Indo-Pacific initially appeared in scholarly literature on oceanography and geopolitics. According to scholarship, the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a region flourished in Nazi Germany and later spread to Japan in the interwar period. "The designation of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical region arose in Haushofer's global imperial strategy, aimed at carving out a new "Pan-region" (similar to Pan-America under U.S. hegemony) in the Far East, to be led by Germany, Japan, and Russia/USSR. The goal was to overcome British and U.S. colonial control of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific regions, with the object of creating a new Indo-Pacific imperium under German-Japanese hegemony that would be capable of countering at the global level the dominance of the Euro- Atlantic super-region by the old colonial powers."[2] German geopoliticians envisioned an Indo-Pacific alliance between republican China and anticolonial India to challenge American and European global power. The term "Indo-Pacific" is becoming increasingly common in today's geopolitical discourse. This term gained popularity in the late 2010s. This approach, like the quadrilateral discussions, which are more of an informal partnership involving the US, Australia, Japan, and India, can be viewed as a step forward. It's realistic to expect that this concept will change how people see the world from a strategic approach. The Indo-Pacific area rose to prominence in international relations literature as the US's strategic and geopolitical threat to China. It is currently the world's geopolitical hub.

Geographically, this area includes all of the nations and islands bordered by the Pacific and Indian oceans. It also includes nations on mainland Africa that border these waters, such as South Africa. Other Indian Ocean territories include the Malay Archipelago, which spans both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Kerguelen Islands and the Seychelles. The political centre of the Indo-Pacific area is physically located in countries such as Australia, ASEAN, Japan, and other Far Eastern countries bordering the Pacific. American philosophers identify the United States as an Indo-Pacific country. Although located in the east of the Indo-Pacific, the colonial states of American Samoa and Guam are in the centre of the region.

The western Pacific region has been an important economic power since prehistoric times. The Portuguese, like other European colonial powers such as the British East India Company and the Dutch, came about the same period. It became into a hub for the creation of a transoceanic shipping network that conveyed products, migrants, and slaves, resulting in increased Indo-Pacific economic integration.

Since ancient times, the Indo-Pacific region has been a source of contention in politics. During the colonial era, powers such as the British East India Company and the Netherlands controlled the region for commercial reasons.

In August 2007, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe called the "confluence" of the Pacific and Indian oceans as "the dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity" in "broader Asia" in a speech. Throughout his speech, the prime minister highlighted the security of the rivers connecting the two seas. In January 2007, the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi produced a report that became the first to highlight these security issues in the area. This joint work was the result of an October 2006 conference in New Delhi between IDSA and the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA). Since 2010, the term has been more prevalent in Indian foreign policy. Leading political personalities, scholars, and commentators are increasingly adopting it. Strategic analysts and high-ranking government/military officials in the United States, Australia, and Japan frequently use the term "region". However, in 2013, Australia's Defence White Paper provided an official, written definition for the phrase. This tendency is strongly linked to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a strategic informal gathering of the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, as well as other regional nations.

Over the millennia, the maritime sector has played an important role in the formation of new and growing countries, as well as changes in regional dynamics and the overall security architecture. This massive power battle is seldom unique. "Many of the future challenges are likely to occur in, and emanate from, the oceanic domain," as acknowledged by Australia and India, highlighting the maritime region's return as an arena for geopolitical conflict. China's march into the Indian and Pacific Oceans calls into doubt the security alliance formed at the end of World War II and sustained after the Cold War ended. The Indo-Pacific area, which unites the Pacific and Indian seas, represents the new geopolitical reality of the twenty-first century.

The United States, Australia, and Japan all view India as playing an important role in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite its position in the Indian Ocean, India has not prioritised maritime security as a strategic priority, worry, or issue due to continental constraints. As a result, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new front in India's foreign policy battles, indicating a shift in New Delhi's strategic environment and the migration of threats from its land borders to its maritime area. This study focuses on New Delhi's viewpoints, challenges, and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, while Washington, DC, Paris, Canberra, and Tokyo continue to support and promote greater Indian involvement in the region.

The Indo-Pacific region sees India as a key actor in the twenty-first century. India became more prominent on the agendas of countries like as Australia, Japan, and the United States, which regarded the Indo-Pacific area as a new arena of strategic conflict. China was altering strategic realities in Canberra, Tokyo, and Washington, DC, with its expanding economic, political, and military actions encompassing Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific has evolved alongside China's rise, particularly in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, resulting in a new strategic environment.

Despite the fact that Beijing's intentions and capabilities differ, its expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific poses a common strategic danger to Canberra, New Delhi, Tokyo, and Washington. In response to these challenges in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, India created an Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's expanding influence in the region and form new alliances in response to changing security situations. India must strike a balance between its rising geopolitical competition with China and its strong connections with the West. As a result, New Delhi's Indo-Pacific policy provided an opportunity to enlarge its area of influence while using partnerships to overcome capacity limits and ensure strategic objectives.

The absence of military conflict in the Indian Ocean during the post-Cold War era allowed India to play an important role while also ensuring a beneficial and safe Indian Ocean for its strategic aims. The Indian administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been compelled to reconsider its foreign policy efforts as China emerges as a supplemental, if not substitute, source of security. China's strategic and capability gap with India is widening as a result of both military modernisation and economic growth. As a result, China is able to provide significant military and economic support to South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Beijing, on the other hand, was able to establish traction in India's immediate surroundings because of New Delhi's welcoming climate. India perceived an unexpected opportunity to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific, which was pushed by Australia, Japan, and the United States, with a specific emphasis on India, in reaction to new geopolitical challenges in its domain of strategic influence.

2. CHINA AS A GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Certain geopolitical challenges are peculiar to the region. This area is now also at the centre of global geopolitics. India's key issue in the early stages of its Indo-Pacific discourse was determining how to define and explain its response to new developments in the region. India initially struggled to define the word in its diplomatic context as Australia, Japan, and the United States demonstrated their various viewpoints and methods, despite the fact that India has now emerged as a prominent actor in the Indo- Pacific architecture. In order to establish influence in the region, India must compete with these powerful powers. Even major countries such as the United States believe that India should take a larger role in resisting Chinese dominance in the region.

Most Western nations now believe that the Indo-Pacific region needs a comprehensive strategy for restricting China; the containment concept has been heavily influenced by China's aggressive rise to prominence. India, along with the other nations in the Indo- Pacific, saw the need to strike a balance between China's growth and its regional leadership. Despite its growing recognition of the need of managing its largest neighbour, New Delhi wanted to avoid being perceived as mindlessly following the West. Furthermore, various people had distinct views and perceptions of the region as a whole. Despite its readiness to play a larger and more important role in security, India maintained its primary focus on the Indian Ocean region.

Nonetheless, while China maintained its firm stance on the South China Sea problem, Indo-Pacific conversations with Australia, Japan, and the United States focused on Southeast Asia, which was India's second-most important theatre of operations after the Indian Ocean. New Delhi showed little interest in expanding its influence beyond diplomatic and commercial links, despite the fact that India's Act East Asia Policy enhanced relations with its ASEAN neighbours. Furthermore, it has better bilateral relations with some nations, like as Vietnam and Singapore, then with others, such as Brunei or the Philippines. Many people have questioned India's standing in the Indo- Pacific region and its readiness to play strategic roles as a result of this strategy.

3. PLATFORM FOR INDIA

The Indo-Pacific region provides a platform for opposing unilateral measures that seek to create new norms and practices or change current ones. India was able to use this forum to coordinate its policy with Beijing. The concept is becoming increasingly essential as a result of the rise of a new power and the need to oppose unilateral activities by one nation. With the ultimate goal of keeping a balance with China, nations worked together to promote and legitimize a rules-based system. Everyone believes that sticking to and honouring existing norms and traditions is critical, even if the concept of a rules-based society is divisive, particularly in industrialised and developing countries.

China's rejection of the international system's norms and laws, which presents a chronic strategic quandary, might be the primary motivator. Adopting the Indo-Pacific region as a wholly new geographic domain reinforced the belief that Beijing's unilateral efforts would be violently and harshly rejected, given that changes to current established norms are mostly driven by Beijing's actions. The expectations were not limited to India. India's problem stemmed from its failure to join in a containment policy against China, despite the fact that Beijing's growth and activities were designed to undermine India's influence in the area and disturb its security situation. India was cognizant of the ramifications for its relations with China, even as it continued to receive aid from key regional actors.

Partnerships as a Central Pillar of India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

Modi's 2018 address at Shangri-La outlined India's Indo-Pacific ambitions, concerns, and limitations. The speech confirmed the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitical limits as "from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas," imposing a significant physical constraint on India's efforts. Four key difficulties arose during Modi's explanation of India's Indo-Pacific policy.

1. The importance of collaboration and teamwork was highlighted in the speech. In his speech, Modi underlined the value of partnerships in India's Indo-Pacific policy and discussed the nation's recent transition from isolation to active participation in international affairs.
2. While highlighting its willingness to work together and value strategic alliances, New Delhi should also steer clear of coalitions or "alliances of containment." For India's smaller partners and neighbours who were worried about getting sucked into a Sino- Indian or Chinese-US geopolitical conflict, this was an extremely important warning. In a period of new great power competition, New Delhi may have hoped to position itself

for the middle powers and smaller countries as the main player in bringing an antagonistic environment under control via collaboration and creative solutions.

3. Third, acknowledging that "shifts in global power" and "foundations of the global order appear shaken," India acknowledged the need for a new security architecture. With strong beliefs and principles that respect the law, conversations, rules, traditions, and norms, the new order should be free, open, and inclusive. New Delhi supported a new order based on rules and norms, even as it acknowledged the construction of new ones. This was demonstrated by the emphasis it placed on these principles, which served as the basis for the development of regional coalitions.
4. As a crucial element of the new system, India promotes regional architecture and groups. In order to further its own goal of a multipolar world, New Delhi placed ASEAN at the core of its Indo-Pacific strategy. India must be one of the core foundations of the international order if its architecture is changing, according to New Delhi. India was able to achieve its worldwide geopolitical objectives thanks to the Indo-Pacific region.

4. INITIATIVES TOWARDS INDO-PACIFIC

Early Indo-Pacific activities in India focused on collaborative infrastructure projects with Japan. This was a clear attempt to counteract the activities that China was doing throughout the area. In 2015, Japan established the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure project, with the goal of providing financial accountability, sustainability, and high-quality infrastructure instead of "cheap, but shoddy" ways.

In 2016, Tokyo and New Delhi emphasized the need of connecting Asia and Africa via the Indian Ocean. The plan eventually evolved into the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, or BRI's maritime component, which is frequently viewed as a direct response to China's Maritime Silk Road. Tokyo and India are concerned that China would emerge as a key competitor in the development of Indo-Pacific infrastructure. Beijing wanted to undercut Tokyo and New Delhi's regional standing by expanding its efforts from Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean. Modi and Abe seek to provide alternatives in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, capitalising on India and Japan's trust in their own democratic systems and increasingly similar ambitions.

While Tokyo was an important economic partner for the region's governments, India played an essential role in the security of various South Asian and Indian Ocean states. Because they lack historical or strategic baggage, Japan and India have continuously implemented a range of efforts targeted at addressing the region's current security issues. The possibilities include a port in the southern Iranian city of Chabahar, a terminal in Sri Lanka, and potential infrastructure deals in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, and Vietnam.

Tokyo is perhaps the nation that makes bilateral investments in India's infrastructure the most, particularly in projects near its northeastern border and in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Historically, these islands and northeastern India have been politically fragile areas with little access to foreign influences and enterprises.

Beijing's growing influence in the area led New Delhi to collaborate with Tokyo on infrastructure, which in turn sparked the Indo-Pacific debate. However, India has begun to exert increasing influence inside the Indo-Pacific area over time. Under the Indo- Pacific strategy, India's diplomatic outreach is far greater than it was in its previous international engagements. The first thing that the Modi government did was send senior delegations to key countries throughout the world. India's bilateral relations were revitalised by these historic visits in a security context that was continuously changing.

India began to deepen and strengthen its ties with its neighbours on the continent and in the islands, as well as with Africa, Europe, the Arctic, Caribbean, and Pacific areas. India concurrently stepped up the frequency of its cooperation with the US, Australia, France, Japan, and other important allies in the Indo-Pacific region. Together with its friends and partners, India was identifying new initiatives and problems in the Indo- Pacific and extending its diplomatic reach into new areas. France and India established the International Solar Alliance in an effort to combat climate change, promote renewable energy sources, and lower the cost of solar energy.

India and its key allies maintain a high degree of bilateral cooperation, as seen by their annual discussions and exchanges. In addition to 2+2 discussions with Australia, Japan, and the US, New Delhi has defence talks with France each year. Annually, there are also many working-level exchanges on a broad range of topics, such as science and technology, cybersecurity, space, and counterterrorism. The leaders of these five countries routinely come together on the periphery of international events and conferences.

5. CONCLUSION

China's increasing aggressiveness and influence in the Indo-Pacific region make India's position all the more important. India aggressively engages in regional security alliances and dialogues to counterbalance China's dominance, viewing the Indo-Pacific region as critical to both its economic and security interests. It is an important component of the Quad, a strategic alliance that also includes the United States, Japan, and Australia. The alliance's goals are to address security concerns raised by China's economic and military endeavours in the Indo-Pacific region and to advance an open, free, and inclusive region.

India bolsters its military might and naval presence to protect vital sea lanes and stave off possible Chinese control. By establishing strategic and commercial links with countries in Southeast Asia through its Act East Policy, India provides alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, India promotes respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based international order—especially in disputed maritime areas. All things considered, India's political, economic, and strategic initiatives significantly offset China's influence and promote stability in the area.

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