



## INDIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND REGIONAL STABILITY

**Tehseena Nazir<sup>1</sup>, Shazia Nazir<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> PG Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, J&K,

Correspondence Address: Tehseena Nazir

[tehseenshahmiri@gmail.com](mailto:tehseenshahmiri@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*India's economic and political engagement with the Asia Pacific region has evolved to encompass a wide range of cooperative efforts beyond its immediate continental neighborhood. This paper examines India's robust engagement in the Asia Pacific, underscoring its commitment to inclusive growth, sustainable development, and regional prosperity through initiatives like the Pacific Community Initiative of the East (PCIOR). The study highlights India's strategic integration, addressing historical ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia, and the multifaceted nature of its engagement, which spans trade, investment, security, and cultural diplomacy. It also delves into India's Indo-Pacific policy, rooted in its historical maritime role, emphasizing six strategic tenets: maritime security, inclusive governance, economic integration, strategic partnerships, sustainable development, and cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, the paper identifies challenges and opportunities in implementing India's Indo-Pacific strategy, including resource allocation, diplomatic maneuvering, and the need for technological advancement. The analysis underscores the potential for India to leverage these challenges to strengthen its regional influence and contribute to a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.*

**Keywords:** *Economic, Political, Asia Pacific, , PCIOR, , Development, Trade, Security, Diplomacy, Challenges, Opportunities.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### **Historical Context of India's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region**

India currently has considerable economic and political linkages with the Asia Pacific region. Thus, India's cooperation has been extended to all countries in the region outside its continental neighborhood. The global discourse of the era, centered on liberal values and globalization processes, has significantly shifted the conventional policy focus of Indian security that mainly prioritized the national border and elite questions. The foundations of India's robust and multifaceted engagement with the Asia Pacific have been meticulously formed by addressing these dynamic challenges and leveraging its unique strengths. The current geographical inclusion of India in the Pacific Community Initiative of the East (PCIOR) unequivocally showcases its commitment to fostering inclusive growth, sustainable development, and regional prosperity. Nonetheless, this integration does not in any way negate the deep historical and traditional ties that India shares with the South-East Asian countries and East Asia.

These enduring relationships serve as the bedrock of India's vibrant and mutually beneficial interactions with the region. India's engagement extends beyond mere economic partnerships and encompasses a wide range of sectors and domains. In the realm of trade and investment, India has emerged as a key player, promoting economic interdependence and win-win outcomes. Additionally, India actively participates in regional forums and dialogues to contribute to the formulation of cooperative strategies, addressing common challenges such as climate change, maritime security, and inclusive governance. Moreover, India's cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in strengthening the bonds of friendship and understanding with the Asia Pacific nations. Through initiatives like language exchange programs, cultural festivals, and educational collaborations, India promotes people-to-people connections, fostering a sense of shared heritage and promoting tolerance and mutual respect. In the field of security, India actively seeks to ensure peace, stability, and harmony in the Asia Pacific region. It engages in strategic dialogues and military exercises, fostering mutual trust and enhancing

interoperability among armed forces. By actively participating in regional security frameworks and mechanisms, India strives to counter transnational threats such as terrorism, cybercrime, and piracy, thereby contributing to a safer and more secure environment. India's commitment to the Asia Pacific region reflects its vision for a peaceful, prosperous, and interconnected world. India's rise as a global power brings immense opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, paving the way for an era of shared growth and collective progress. As India continues to expand its horizons and deepen its engagements, it remains steadfast in working towards a future where all nations in the region can thrive and flourish harmoniously, building a stronger and more inclusive Asia Pacific community.

India's engagement in the Western Indian and Pacific Ocean region is deeply ingrained in the fabric of historical relationships that have spanned countless centuries. Through the annals of time, India and the East African littoral, as well as the diverse Indian Ocean states located on the African and Arabian littorals, have shared an unbreakable bond enriched by memories, bustling commercial exchanges, and a vibrant cultural heritage. In the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, trade routes influenced by the ebb and flow of monsoons have played a pivotal role in shaping the interconnectedness and unity among these maritime states. This facet of Indian Ocean trade, characterized by its intricate network of sea routes, has left an indelible mark on the multifaceted interaction that has united the diverse and vibrant littoral states. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that a pivotal era in the historiography of Indian Ocean history and the commercial and cultural interaction within the expansive Indian Ocean world emerged during the early period of India's colonization by European countries. As these influential external powers sought to establish their dominance in this region, their presence catalyzed profound shifts in the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the Indian Ocean world, forever altering the course of history.

### **Key Tenets of India's Indo-Pacific Policy**

Firstly, it is important to note that the Indian concept of the Indo-Pacific is not a recent revelation for India. As this thesis will argue, despite the current resurgence of the concept, India, as a long-standing Indian Ocean power, has possessed an understanding of the Indo-Pacific for quite some time. The pivotal conference held in Singapore in June 2018 is widely regarded as the platform where India's policy trajectory on the Indo-Pacific was laid out. However, it is essential to acknowledge that India's vision for the Indo-Pacific dates back to earlier speeches and interviews by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and has remained a continuous aspect of India's policy landscape as wider Asia has embraced the concept. It should be noted, though, that the specifics of India's policy differ from certain other approaches, particularly those of the United States and the QUAD. This perspective is primarily projected as a response to the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), as well as an endeavor to form a larger alliance that would safeguard the freedom of navigation operations (FONops) in the South China Sea - concepts that hold significant foreign influences.

The term "Indo-Pacific," as an Indian vision, was originally coined by the Indian Prime Minister during his address at the Indian Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore in 2018. India's enduring understanding of the Indo-Pacific is deeply rooted in its historical role as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean region. Over the years, India has recognized the interconnectedness and interdependence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, realizing that events and developments in both regions have a direct impact on its national security and interests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his earlier speeches and interviews, has eloquently articulated India's perspective on the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing the need for a cooperative and inclusive approach that promotes peace, prosperity, and stability in the region. The significant conference held in Singapore in June 2018, which gained considerable attention, laid the foundation for India's comprehensive policy on the Indo-Pacific. It served as a crucial platform for India to outline its vision and priorities, highlighting the importance of maritime security, economic connectivity, and strategic partnerships in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. As wider Asia started embracing the concept, India's long-standing commitment to the Indo-Pacific became more apparent. It became evident that India's engagement and participation in the region were not mere conjectures but a cohesive and consistent strategy that aimed to enhance India's influence and contribute to regional stability.

While India shares common goals with other like-minded countries, such as the United States and the



QUAD, it is crucial to recognize the distinguishing aspects of India's policy towards the Indo-Pacific. India's approach is multifaceted, addressing both geopolitical and economic dimensions. It seeks to strike a balance between its strategic autonomy and cooperation with other nations, taking into account its unique historical, geographical, and cultural context. India's policy is not driven solely by security concerns or containment strategies but encompasses a broader vision of regional order based on openness, inclusivity, and respect for international law. The Indian vision for the Indo-Pacific has been significantly influenced by various factors, particularly the rise of China and its ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). India recognizes the potential implications of this initiative, both in terms of economic influence and security challenges. Therefore, India's Indo-Pacific policy serves as a proactive response to safeguard its interests and promote a rules-based international order.

It aims to counterbalance any potential hegemonic tendencies and ensure that the region remains free, open, and inclusive. Furthermore, India's Indo-Pacific vision encompasses the aspiration to establish a larger alliance of like-minded countries that can collectively ensure freedom of navigation operations (FONops) in the South China Sea. India recognizes the strategic importance of this vital sea route for regional and global trade and stability. By actively engaging and cooperating with other countries, India aims to contribute to the maintenance of peace and security in the South China Sea, while upholding the principles of international law and respecting the sovereignty of all nations involved. In conclusion, the Indian concept of the Indo-Pacific is not a recent development but is deeply ingrained in India's history and strategic thinking. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's articulation of India's vision and subsequent policy initiatives have solidified India's position as a key actor in the region. As the Indo-Pacific gains prominence on the global stage, India's unique perspective, nuanced approach, and commitment to a cooperative and inclusive order will continue to shape its engagement and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. The term "Indo-Pacific," as coined by the Indian Prime Minister, serves as a testament to India's enduring vision and determination to play a significant role in this dynamic and interconnected region.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific is a strategic construct that has gained considerable currency in the policy discourse of late. As a region evolves in consonance with its growing strategic-economic salience and capacity to shape the global balance of power, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is expected to become increasingly central to regional and global politics. The thesis argues that India's Indo-Pacific policy is underpinned by six strategic tenets/traits. The first strategic tenet/traits that underpin India's Indo-Pacific policy is the recognition of the significance of maritime security in fostering regional stability and economic development. India acknowledges the critical role of maritime trade in connecting nations and facilitating economic growth. By prioritizing the protection of sea lanes and maritime infrastructure, India aims to safeguard its own economic interests while contributing to the security and prosperity of the wider Indo-Pacific region. Secondly, India's Indo-Pacific policy highlights the importance of inclusive and rules-based governance. Recognizing the interdependence of nations in the region, India advocates for a rules-based international order that upholds principles such as freedom of navigation, respect for territorial integrity, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

By promoting a multilateral and inclusive approach, India seeks to encourage cooperation, trust, and stability among Indo-Pacific nations. The third strategic tenet/trait centers around India's commitment to economic integration and connectivity. India recognizes that economic cooperation and integration are essential drivers of regional growth and stability. Through initiatives like the "Act East Policy" and the development of infrastructure projects, India aims to enhance connectivity and foster greater economic linkages between the countries of the Indo-Pacific. By promoting trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges, India seeks to create a more prosperous and interconnected region. India's Indo-Pacific policy emphasizes the significance of strategic partnerships and alliances. India seeks to strengthen its existing partnerships and forge new alliances with like-minded countries in the region. By deepening defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises, India aims to enhance regional security capabilities and effectively respond to common challenges such as terrorism, maritime piracy, and natural disasters. Fifthly, India's Indo-Pacific policy highlights the importance of sustainable development and environmental stewardship. Recognizing the vulnerability of the region to climate

change and environmental degradation, India advocates for sustainable growth and resource management. By promoting clean energy, conservation efforts, and capacity-building initiatives, India aims to mitigate environmental risks and contribute to the long-term stability and resilience of the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, India's Indo-Pacific policy underscores the significance of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges. India recognizes the rich diversity of the Indo-Pacific region and the role of cultural exchanges in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. By promoting cultural events, educational partnerships, and tourism, India seeks to strengthen people-to-people ties and promote a shared sense of belonging among the nations of the Indo-Pacific. In conclusion, India's Indo-Pacific policy is guided by these six strategic tenets/traits. By prioritizing maritime security, advocating for inclusive governance, promoting economic integration, strengthening strategic partnerships, advocating for sustainable development, and fostering cultural diplomacy, India seeks to contribute to a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing India's Indo-Pacific Strategy**

In affirming its unwavering commitment and absolute preparedness to play a preeminent and integral role in the vast and dynamic Indo-Pacific region, India is confronted with a myriad of multifaceted challenges that are intricately interwoven with its increasingly prominent security and diplomatic responsibilities. These challenges, which necessitate deft navigation and adroit maneuvering, span across a spectrum of intricate dimensions, encompassing various aspects such as resource provision, diplomatic maneuvering, and strategic engagement. At the very heart of these challenges lies the complex and multifarious nature of the maritime areas that constitute the bedrock of the Indo-Pacific theater. These maritime spaces, imbued with immense political and security ramifications, serve as the epicenter of a fierce clash of interests among the paramount actors in the region such as China, the United States, and the esteemed Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Unlike the sprawling expanse of Asia's colossal landmass, the surrounding seas that envelop the Indo-Pacific are characterized by their profound depth and unfettered freedom, thereby inherently diminishing the relative power wielded by continental military actors in this domain. In its steadfast pursuit of bolstering and fortifying its diplomatic and security footprint in the Indo-Pacific, India is confronted with the imperative need to allocate and dedicate ample resources to effectively discharge its evolving role. This undertaking, however, presents a formidable and intricate conundrum for India, beset as it is by discernible budgetary limitations and technological constraints. A leadership role in safeguarding and ensuring maritime security in the constantly evolving and increasingly complex Indo-Pacific theater may prove to be exorbitantly and prohibitively costly for India, given the multifarious challenges that dot the landscape of this captivating and dynamic region.

New concept or initiatives always pose certain challenges as there is nothing like a model pattern to be followed. Initiating any new activity requires resources as well as prior experience. This is true for India also as it marches towards playing a more active Indo-Pacific role. It is possible to list some of the challenges India may likely face in its march forward. These challenges include those of economic power, access to adequate long-term capital, maritime resources and the long water logistic lines, military resources, skilled manpower, political stability, technological vitality, application of technology for growth in productivity, growth of India's soft power, India's strategic culture, and the ability to reap the benefits of high economic growth. However, challenges also provide opportunities to the country for securing its interests. In increasing power, countries develop strengths but at the cost of certain weaknesses. In addition, challenges also originate from within India. Some of the potential challenges that India may encounter on its path towards a more active Indo-Pacific role include the need to establish strong diplomatic relations with other regional powers, the development of sustainable infrastructure to support increased trade and connectivity, the management of potential conflicts and disputes in the region, the promotion of inclusive growth that benefits all countries involved, the enhancement of cybersecurity measures to protect against emerging threats, the adaptation to emerging technologies and their impact on various industries, the fostering of cultural exchanges and collaborations to strengthen soft power, the consolidation of political stability and governance, the nurturing of a skilled workforce to drive innovation and productivity, the preservation of environmental resources and sustainable





development practices, the improvement of healthcare and social welfare systems to meet the needs of a growing population, and the promotion of gender equality and social inclusivity. While these challenges may pose difficulties and complexities, they also present opportunities for India to showcase its capabilities, foster partnerships, and contribute to regional peace, stability, and prosperity. By addressing these challenges effectively, India can position itself as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region and realize its full potential as a global power.

### Conclusion and Future Prospects

To sum up, we have seen what Northeast Asia is and what it is not. There is no internal balance of power in the normal sense in Northeast Asia – it is deprived of the strategic sentiment and strategic attributes that might be indicative of a deeper, more vigorous internal balance of power. Yet, if not an internal balance of power on the Asian continent, what can we call this nascent desire to weld the five strategic assets together for some nebulous but still influential collective benefit? In analyzing the situation, it becomes evident that Northeast Asia is a region filled with unique complexities and dynamics. The absence of a traditional internal balance of power fosters an intriguing environment where strategic sentiment and attributes are conspicuously lacking. This absence, however, does not diminish the existence of a captivating and formidable force emerging within the Asian continent. It is this force that yearns to intertwine the five strategic assets, creating an amalgamation that could potentially yield a nebulous yet remarkably influential collective benefit.

This nascent desire holds the potential to shape the course of Northeast Asia and leave an indelible mark on the global stage. The interplay between these assets transcends conventional notions of power dynamics, giving rise to a novel and compelling narrative. As we continue to delve into the intricacies of this intricate web of relationships, it becomes increasingly apparent that this amalgamation signifies not only a potential shift in power dynamics but also a beacon of hope for collective progress and prosperity within Northeast Asia. The desire to merge these strategic assets represents a transformative yet enigmatic force, paving the way for new possibilities and avenues of collaboration. It is a call to arms, urging us to explore uncharted territories and pioneer a future where the interconnectedness of these assets serves as the cornerstone for mutual growth and development. In essence, what we witness in Northeast Asia is not merely an absence of traditional balance of power, but rather an embrace of a novel trajectory that holds the power to redefine the very essence of collective aspirations and achievements.

India's Look East Policy and its evolving Indo-Pacific vision seek to validate India's centrality in what is emerging as the focal point of power politics in the decades to come. By not choosing to become an Indo-Pacific power, the repercussions for India could be profound, given that the Northeast Asian regional environment is not stable. Moreover, the internal balance of power, flux, and strategic calculations make it exceedingly challenging to identify strategic sentiments or attributes that could potentially contribute to balancing, or even soft balancing. Consequently, it becomes increasingly arduous to argue that Asia's internal balance of power system, as a whole, effectively challenges the unipolarism exhibited by Russia and China, even if one were to argue that interfaces are emerging within Asia. Indeed, for the internal balance of power system as a whole, it does not appear that such challenges are occurring. Therefore, Northeast Asia, in this context, emerges as the last great bastion of regionalism anywhere in the world, demanding serious intellectual and scholarly efforts in both its development and maintenance.

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*Tehseena Nazir<sup>1</sup>, Shazia Nazir<sup>2</sup>*

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