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## International Relations

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8

### **India and China in East Asia** Contestations and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Era

**Dr. Amlan Dutta**  
Junior Fellow, PMML



Centre for Contemporary Studies  
Prime Ministers Museum and Library  
2026

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*Published by*  
Centre for Contemporary Studies  
Prime Ministers Museum and Library  
Teen Murti House  
New Delhi- 110011

E-mail: [director.nmml@gov.in](mailto:director.nmml@gov.in)  
ISBN: 978-93-84793-61-6

# India and China in East Asia

## Contestations and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Era<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Amlan Dutta

### Abstract

From the age-old idiom of “Peaceful Existence” used to define India-China relations historically, today the relations between the two Asian giants are described to as “Confrontational Coexistence”. China being the larger economic and military power than India, is already seen in many academic and strategic circles as an equal to the US, whereas India is keen to be seen as one of the poles in a multipolar world. India and China have a boundary dispute, and Beijing has often raked it up to keep India on its toes. India is gradually defining its strategic response to Chinese aggression through its active involvement in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, which spans from eastern Africa to the western Americas. As tensions with China rise, especially along the Himalayan border and through Beijing's increasing forays in the Indian Ocean Region, India has strengthened its strategic partnerships with the US and other like-minded democracies, and reaffirmed its commitment to a Free, Open, Inclusive, and Rules-Based international order. This paper analyses India and China within the wider Indo-Pacific framework in East Asia, focusing on their intricate rivalries, contestations and competitions. It aims to analyze the strategic considerations of both nations, their interactions with East Asian countries, and the ramifications of their competition for regional stability, security, and economic integration within the evolving global framework.

Keywords: India, China, US, Indo-Pacific, East Asia, Indian Ocean

### 1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the paramount theatre of international power politics in the 21st century<sup>2</sup>. The area is influenced by many major players, including India and China—two economic giants and Asian superpowers with ancient civilizational history and distinct modern political frameworks, economic objectives, and regional aspirations. The growing significance of the Indo-Pacific, which encompasses a vast maritime region from the East Coast of Africa to the West Coast of the Americas, has intensified the strategic rivalry between India and China, particularly in East Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of the talk delivered at Centre for Contemporary Studies, PMML, New Delhi, on 14 August 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Pardhe, Sachin N. ‘India's Role in the Indo-Pacific: Relocating Priorities in the 21st Century Geopolitics’, *IUP Journal of International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 1, (2024), pp. 67-79. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/673ecd4725dea365e9de47683542f229/1?cbl=2029994&pq-origsite=gscholar> (Last Accessed June 4, 2024)

Beijing's foreign policy is characterized by its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the militarization of the South China Sea, and the expansion of its economic influence across Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands, all indicative of its ambition to establish itself as a global force<sup>3</sup>. In response, India has implemented its Act East Policy (departing from the earlier version called the Look East Policy), revitalized strategic partnerships with multiple like-minded nations, and adopted a proactive stance in forums like the Quad (a grouping of India, the US, Japan and Australia), aimed at safeguarding a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

East Asia, which includes key players such as Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN grouping, has become a primary arena for the India-China rivalry<sup>4</sup>. China aspires to establish itself as a regional hegemon via economic investments and diplomatic initiatives, whereas India emphasizes regional connectivity, cultural diplomacy, and collaborative security endeavours.

## 2. East Asian region & its geopolitics

Comprising China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Taiwan, and Mongolia, East Asia is a key sub-region within the Indo-Pacific geopolitical framework. Although all of these states fall under the East Asian umbrella, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea—nations central to the region's strategic dynamics due to their economic power, military capability, and historical rivalries—are specifically referred to as Northeast Asia<sup>5</sup>. Taiwan is geopolitically important, especially because of its strategic position in the Western Pacific and dispute with China.

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<sup>3</sup> Oosterveld, Willem, Eric Wilms, and Katarina Kertysova, *The Belt and Road Initiative looks East: Political implications of China's economic forays in the Caribbean and the South Pacific*, (Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022). [https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5ZI9DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA5&dq=Oosterveld,+Wille+m,+Eric+Wilms,+and+Katarina+Kertysova.+The+Belt+and+Road+Initiative+looks+East:+Political+implications+of+China%E2%80%99s+economic+forays+in+the+Caribbean+and+the+South+Pacific.+The+Hague+Centre+for+Strategic+Studies,+2022&ots=MD\\_qCwCiHz&sig=olblOhhPExxvrxwZrr6RXQOGnrc&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5ZI9DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA5&dq=Oosterveld,+Wille+m,+Eric+Wilms,+and+Katarina+Kertysova.+The+Belt+and+Road+Initiative+looks+East:+Political+implications+of+China%E2%80%99s+economic+forays+in+the+Caribbean+and+the+South+Pacific.+The+Hague+Centre+for+Strategic+Studies,+2022&ots=MD_qCwCiHz&sig=olblOhhPExxvrxwZrr6RXQOGnrc&redir_esc=y) (Last Accessed June 4, 2025)

<sup>4</sup> Singh, Abhay Kumar, *India-China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer*, (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2021). [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Abhay-Singh-44/publication/362910580\\_India-China\\_Rivalry\\_Asymmetric\\_No\\_Longer\\_An\\_Assessment\\_of\\_China's\\_Evolving\\_Perceptions\\_of\\_India/links/630748c25eed5e4bd11a6cf7/India-China-Rivalry-Asymmetric-No-Longer-An-Assessment-of-China-s-Evolving-Perceptions-of-India.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Abhay-Singh-44/publication/362910580_India-China_Rivalry_Asymmetric_No_Longer_An_Assessment_of_China's_Evolving_Perceptions_of_India/links/630748c25eed5e4bd11a6cf7/India-China-Rivalry-Asymmetric-No-Longer-An-Assessment-of-China-s-Evolving-Perceptions-of-India.pdf) (Last Accessed July 1, 2024)

<sup>5</sup> Iwashita, Akihiro, Yong-Chool Ha, and Edward Boyle (Eds), *Geo-Politics in Northeast Asia*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023). <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/57621> (Last Accessed July 19, 2024)



Figure 1. EAST ASIAN REGION,

Because of their ingrained military, economic, and political interests in the East, Russia and the U.S. are also seen as East Asian powers. Russia's proximity to Northeast Asia and its interactions with China and North Korea, and the US' ties with Japan and South Korea, define them as major outside players in East Asia's power system<sup>6</sup>.

The ten ASEAN nations constitute Southeast Asia to the south, a region that links East Asia to South Asia and the Indian Ocean, therefore creating a strategic bridge in the Indo-Pacific arc<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>조유찬, 2024. *Analysis on Japan and South Korea's Southeast Asian Security Strategy from Middle Power Perspective* (Doctoral dissertation, 서울대학교대학원). <https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/209524> (Last Accessed June 5, 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Tran, Claire Thi-Liên, Suthiphand Chirathivat, and Prabir De, *Indo-Pacific and Asean*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2024). <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003559245-1/indo-pacific-asean-claire-thi-li%C3%A0n-tran-suthiphand-chirathivat-prabir-de> (Last Accessed August 9, 2024)

Though India and Australia are physically located in South Asia and Oceania respectively, both are acknowledged as major Indo-Pacific powers<sup>8</sup>. Their increasing participation in regional security via venues like the Quad (India, Australia, Japan, and the U.S.) and common interests in maritime security and economic corridors position them as significant players in determining the East Asian balance of power.

Thus, seeing East Asia through the larger Indo-Pacific prism calls for acknowledging not just its core members but also peripheral countries like India and Australia, altering the regional order by means of strategic alliances and competitive diplomacy.

The geopolitics of East Asia is shaped by a multifaceted array of historical grievances, strategic alliances, economic interdependence, and power rivalry, primarily including the U.S., China, Japan, and South Korea<sup>9</sup>. The core of the region's security framework is the U.S.-led 'Hubs and Spokes' model, whereby Japan and South Korea function as pivotal 'hubs'. This has enabled the U.S. to have a consistent military presence in the region via these bilateral security partnerships to deter threats from China and North Korea.

Nevertheless, Japan–South Korea ties remain significantly strained by historical grievances, notably the issue of "comfort women," a euphemism referring to Korean women who were coerced into sexual slavery for the Japanese soldiers during World War II<sup>10</sup>. A 2016 South Korean court judgment mandating Japan to pay surviving victims exacerbated existing relations, already strained by textbook debates and divergent narratives of the colonial history<sup>11</sup>. The unsolved difficulties continue to restrict trilateral collaboration among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.

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<sup>8</sup> Das, Shubhamitra, 'Middle power cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: India and Australia at the forefront' *International Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4, (2021), pp. 513-529. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00208817211056742> (Last Accessed August 10, 2024)

<sup>9</sup> Shah, Babar, Sheheryar Khan, and Rahmat Shah, 'Asia's Quest For Stability: Regionalism As A Geopolitical Strategy' *Sociology & Cultural Research Review*, vol. 3, no. 01 (2025): 535-558. <https://www.scrjournal.com/index.php/14/article/view/100> (Last Accessed August 28, 2024)

<sup>10</sup> Dalton, Lois, *Narratives of Violence: Colonialism, Gender and Sexual Violence in Japan and Korea*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2023). [https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/graduate\\_thesis\\_or\\_dissertations/5x21tp80k](https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/5x21tp80k) (Last Accessed June 15, 2024)

<sup>11</sup> Tawara Yoshifumi, 'Comfort Women, Textbooks, and the Rise of 'New Right' Revisionism', in *Denying the Comfort Women: The Japanese State's Assault on Historical Truth* edited by Rumiko Nishino, Puja Kim, and Akane Onozawa, (London: Routledge, 2018), (the Comfort Women issue, Textbook issue, etc.) <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315170015-11/comfort-women-textbooks-rise-new-right-revisionism-tawara-yoshifumi> (Last Accessed October 7, 2024)

Conversely, China–Japan relations exhibit the contradiction of "Hot Economics, Cold Politics." Despite robust economic and business connections, the diplomatic relationship between China and Japan is characterized by mistrust, particularly with the conflict over the Japan-controlled Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea<sup>12</sup>. China's heightened maritime aggressiveness and military modernization have escalated tensions with Japan, prompting the latter to strengthen its security alliance with the U.S. and pursue collaborative defence initiatives in the region.

Despite being a longstanding ally of the U.S., South Korea has gradually pivoted towards China in recent years, favouring it for economic and financial considerations<sup>13</sup>. China is South Korea's primary commercial partner, and alterations in Seoul's foreign policy often reflect the ideological inclinations of its ruling administration. Progressive regimes often advocate for cooperation with China and North Korea, whilst conservative governments typically associate more closely with the U.S. and Japan.

In August 2023, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea signed the Camp David Accord, establishing a trilateral security partnership to address shared challenges from China and North Korea<sup>14</sup>. This landmark agreement formalizes trilateral security collaboration across several domains, including information sharing, joint military exercises, and synchronized strategic communication in the Indo-Pacific region.

In May 2024, Japan, South Korea, and China reconvened their Trilateral Summit, four and a half years after the process was halted owing to ongoing bilateral tensions<sup>15</sup>. The ninth edition of the conference sought to revitalize talks on trade, regional resilience, and pandemic

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<sup>12</sup> Deng, Rui, "Political Cold and Economic Hot" in Sino-Japanese Diplomatic Relations Since the New Century', *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, vol.15, (2023), pp. 239-247. <https://www.ewadirect.com/proceedings/lnep/article/view/5261> (Last Accessed August 17, 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Rozman, Gilbert, 'Edging toward Bipolarity: South Korea's Regional Reorientation, 2020–2022', in *South Korea's Wild Ride*, (Routledge, 2023), pp. 128-154. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003394792-9/edging-toward-bipolarity-gilbert-rozman> (Last Accessed November 30, 2024)

<sup>14</sup> Ward, Robert, 'A Fragile Convergence: The US–Japan–South Korea Camp David Summit' in *Survival: October–November 2023*, pp. 25-35. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003429388-3/fragile-convergence-us%E2%80%93japan%E2%80%93south-korea-camp-david-summit-robert-ward> (Last Accessed July 31, 2024)

<sup>15</sup> Fiori, Antonio, and Marco Milani, 'Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization' *ASIA MAIOR*, vol. 34 (2024), pp 39-64. <https://cris.unibo.it/handle/11585/973114> (Last Accessed June 5, 2024)

recovery; nevertheless, enduring mutual mistrust among the three nations is expected to hinder meaningful long-term collaboration.

China's extensive territorial claims in the South China Sea, which have encountered resistance from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Taiwan, are unsurprising. The conflicts, stemming from sovereignty and resource access, have strained China's ties with Southeast Asian countries and attracted the attention of external powers like the U.S. and India, who advocate for freedom of navigation and adherence to international law in disputed seas<sup>16</sup>.

Hence, East Asian geopolitics is characterized by a precarious balance of power, historical animosities, and a dynamic alliance system. While a tertiary level of cooperation, economic interdependence, offers avenues for collaboration, security concerns and nationalist feelings impede further diplomatic advancement.

### 3. Contextualising the rise of the Indo-Pacific

#### 3.1. Conceptual and Strategic Evolution of the term Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has risen fast to become central to global political concerns in the last decade influencing regional diplomatic relationships. The concept unifies the Indian and Pacific oceans into a single theatre, while breaking away from the 20th-century thinking that dictated strategic endeavours in these marine regions existed independently from one another<sup>17</sup>. At the heart of the Indo-Pacific narrative lie core principles such as freedom of navigation, adherence to international law, and a free, open, and inclusive maritime domain. The modern political adoption of this term emerged in recent years despite its fundamental bases stemming from the natural and strategic connection between these maritime spaces. Prof. Rory Medcalf from the Australian National University explains that the Indo-Pacific concept has existed as long as 'the fish inhabited its waters'<sup>18</sup>. The Australian Defence Policy White Paper of 2013<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Seo, Youngmin, 'Power Shift, the South China Sea Dispute, and the Role of International Law', *Mich. J. Int'l L.* 45, 2024, 93.

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/mjil45&div=7&id=&page=>(Last Accessed October 10, 2024)

<sup>17</sup> Malhotra, A, *India in the Indo-Pacific: Understanding India's Security Orientation Towards Southeast and East Asia* (Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2022) p. 355. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/57067> (Last Accessed July 24, 2024)

<sup>18</sup> (Defence Policy White Paper, 2013) <https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/White-paper-on-defense-2013-1.pdf> (Last Accessed July 21, 2024)

<sup>19</sup> Dowse, Andrew, 'Australia's Defense Strategy', *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 6 (2024). [https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A15%3A13524511/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A179676395&crl=c&link\\_origin=scholar.google.com](https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A15%3A13524511/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A179676395&crl=c&link_origin=scholar.google.com)(Last Accessed August 3, 2024)

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officially introduced the term "Indo-Pacific" as such it became the first official use of the phrase in history, which later prompted international recognition of this unified strategic and economic region.

The strategic community worldwide has intensified its use of the term Indo-Pacific since 2010 even though scholars disagree about the basic components of its meaning<sup>20</sup>. As a geographical concept, the Indo-Pacific region has been used to describe the Indian and Pacific Oceans but it now functions as a geopolitical system which represents shifting global powers and strategic partnerships and economic investments across Asia as well as other parts of the world.



*Figure 2. INDO PACIFIC REGION*

At its core, the Indo-Pacific refers to the vast maritime space stretching from the eastern shores of Africa, across the Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia, and into the western Pacific.

<sup>20</sup> Larsen, Kevin, 'The Competition for the Indo Pacific: The United States, China and their competition for influence through multilateralism within the Indo-Pacific region', (2024). <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1870787> (Last Accessed November 1, 2024)

Strategic communities in India, Japan, Australia and the U.S. adopted the former geographical term for academic and maritime studies to become a political concept symbolizing their emerging strategic cooperation. The strategic term encompasses all regional geographic areas through which rival nations conduct multiplex political actions, which combine both competitive approaches and collaborative initiatives, as well as disputing methods. This development reveals economic and security interest connections together with geographic closeness<sup>21</sup>.

China stands as one of the strongest opponents to the term Indo-Pacific calling it a Western-based construct which exists only to contain China. Beijing depicts the concept as a strategy to establish new bloc alignments while pretending to push for maritime free trade practices<sup>22</sup>. China's rise coupled with its South China Sea assertive behaviour, has propelled the militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region because of growing fears about navigation freedom and maritime sovereignty and the rules-based international order status. The U.S. along with India and Japan and Australia, have established the Indo-Pacific region as a vital strategic space against China's rise into a regional power. The creation of the security forum known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) demonstrates this transformation because it works primarily on maritime security together with cyber defence infrastructure and planning coordination for strategic aims<sup>23</sup>.

The transition toward the Indo-Pacific phase represents an essential change because it stretches beyond economic perspectives to add security components and places India at its core<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Sellers, Helen, *The Australia-India Maritime Security Relationship: Navigating the Currents of Strategic Culture*, (Australia: University of Canberra, 2021), PhD diss. [https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/54428516/Sellers\\_Helen.pdf](https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/54428516/Sellers_Helen.pdf) (Last Accessed December 13, 2024)

<sup>22</sup> Pinho, Catarina Leite de Faria Abreu de, *Beijing's maritime strategy in the South China Sea*, PhD diss., 2024. <https://repositorio.ucp.pt/entities/publication/6d0dbac7-77f5-4ffe-8202-a5e3cb0cf359> (Last Accessed July 31, 2024)

<sup>23</sup> Koukakis, LTC Georgios, 'National Security, Foreign Policy, Intelligence, Cybersecurity, National Defense, Maritime Security, Risk Analysis and Foresight Strategic Documents Issued by Regional and International Actors in 2023', (Center for International Strategic Analyses, KEDISA, 2024). [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Georgios-Koukakis-2/publication/378498295\\_National\\_Security\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Intelligence\\_Cybersecurity\\_National\\_Defence\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Risk\\_Analysis\\_and\\_Foresight\\_Strategic\\_Documents\\_Issued\\_by\\_Regional\\_and\\_International\\_Actors\\_in\\_2023/links/65ddc559adc608480aed41c2/National-Security-Foreign-Policy-Intelligence-Cybersecurity-National-Defence-Maritime-Security-Risk-Analysis-and-Foresight-Strategic-Documents-Issued-by-Regional-and-International-Actors-in-2023.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Georgios-Koukakis-2/publication/378498295_National_Security_Foreign_Policy_Intelligence_Cybersecurity_National_Defence_Maritime_Security_Risk_Analysis_and_Foresight_Strategic_Documents_Issued_by_Regional_and_International_Actors_in_2023/links/65ddc559adc608480aed41c2/National-Security-Foreign-Policy-Intelligence-Cybersecurity-National-Defence-Maritime-Security-Risk-Analysis-and-Foresight-Strategic-Documents-Issued-by-Regional-and-International-Actors-in-2023.pdf) (Last Accessed February 7, 2025)

<sup>24</sup> India-eu, Furthering, Triangular Collaboration, R. Krishnamurthy, and R. Ghiasy, 'The Transitioning Security Order in the Indo-Pacific' (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2022). [https://leidenasiacentre.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TTSOITIP\\_Report.pdf](https://leidenasiacentre.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TTSOITIP_Report.pdf). (Last Accessed March 17, 2025)

Though the usage of the term Indo-Pacific has become more popular worldwide, India's influence in forming, defining, and supporting Indo-Pacific frameworks is becoming ever more important. Furthermore, the strategic exchanges among East Asian countries within this larger geographical realm emphasize the growing conflicts and rivalry influencing the regional order.<sup>25</sup>



*Figure 3. INDIA AT THE CENTRESTAGE*

The Indo-Pacific concept differs from the Asia-Pacific mindset because India occupies its central position while offering both strategic importance and symbolic value<sup>26</sup>. The Indo-

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<sup>25</sup> Mazumdar, Sayantani Sen, 'India's Role in the Indo-Pacific Region: An Overview of Strategic Geopolitical Convergences', *Global Political Economy, Geopolitics and International Security: The World in Permacrisis*, 2024, 275-290. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-2231-0\\_16](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-2231-0_16) (Last Accessed January 5, 2025)

<sup>26</sup>Yadav, Madan, 'Emergence of The Indo-Pacific: Geopolitics of Regional Cooperation', *The JMC Review*, vol. 6, 2022. <https://www.jmc.ac.in/uploads/staticfiles/jmcreview/vol6/The%20JMC%20Review%20Madan%20Yadav.pdf> (Last Accessed January 17, 2025)

Pacific allegory develops because members desire maritime protection to secure vital commercial and resource areas through vital shipping networks for both trade and energy exports. Widespread approval for using the term "Indo-Pacific" results from its clear acknowledgment of India's expanding strategic importance across regional and international matters and rising global civil and political influence.

The economic expansion of India, combined with its growth as a security player designated as a Net Security Provider, positions the country at the forefront of emerging geopolitical alignments. The current strategic rethinking supports India's public role in regional security alongside infrastructure development and diplomatic bilateral relations as elements that were previously forgotten under the older "Asia-Pacific" framework<sup>27</sup>.

India holds an advantageous strategic position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which delivers extensive benefits and important duties. The strategic position strengthens India's capability to influence regional developments but simultaneously creates new security and geostrategic threats for the nation. The popularity of the Indo-Pacific designation mainly stems from India's essential position in developing what the region will become.

With Prime Minister Modi's presentation of India's vision for a Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, the phrase acquired political momentum. India promotes ASEAN centrality, the rule of law, and cooperative security, therefore separating itself from the binary Cold War-style containment policies. India maintains its strategic autonomy by multilaterally, including through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), East Asia Summit, and bilateral alliances with nations including Vietnam, Japan, and Indonesia, even while it participates in strategic groups including the Quad and Malabar naval exercises<sup>28</sup>.

India's strong participation in marine domain awareness, capacity building, and infrastructure development projects such as Project SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) helps to further support its traction in the Indo-Pacific. These projects indicate India's will to

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<sup>27</sup> Chadha, A, 'Strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific', *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, Edited By Barbara Kratiuk, Jeroen Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskólska, Yoichiro Sato, (India: Routledge, 2023), pp. 267-289.

<sup>28</sup> Choudhury, Srabani Roy, ed. *The Indo-Pacific Theatre: Strategic Visions and Frameworks*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2022).

[https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KcyUEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=Choudhury,+S.+R.+\(Ed.\).+\(2022\).+The+Indo-Pacific+Theatre:+Strategic+Visions+and+Frameworks.+Taylor+%26+Francis.&ots=sf7QGT1Fpa&sig=4ZXEGV6tBF9MKA02UvZPQW0yL9A&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KcyUEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT7&dq=Choudhury,+S.+R.+(Ed.).+(2022).+The+Indo-Pacific+Theatre:+Strategic+Visions+and+Frameworks.+Taylor+%26+Francis.&ots=sf7QGT1Fpa&sig=4ZXEGV6tBF9MKA02UvZPQW0yL9A&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false) (Last Accessed September 10, 2024)

be a net security supplier in the Indian Ocean Region and a major player in the Indo-Pacific region.

#### **4. India and China in East Asia: A strategic contest in trade and geo-economics**

##### **4.1. India's Strategic Vision and Objectives in East Asia**

India's engagement with East Asia has undergone a strategic transformation in recent decades, moving beyond historical and civilizational linkages to a dynamic and multifaceted policy of economic integration, strategic partnerships, and political alignment. East Asia today stands as a critical region for India—not only in terms of trade but also as a geostrategic pivot in India's broader Indo-Pacific vision. India made its strategic move toward East Asia after the Cold War ended, bringing uncertainties in geopolitics and economic transformations. India lost its historic Russian strategic relationship after the collapse of the Soviet Union, so it started searching for fresh diplomatic and economic alliances<sup>29</sup>. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced the “Look East Policy” in 1991 because he saw the rising economic power of East Asia and understood India's need to participate in Asian economic networks. The policy started as economically motivated to bring foreign trade, along with investments and technological collaboration, essential for the advancement of India's domestic sector. The strategic outlook of Asia underwent major changes during the past twenty years because of China's rapid growth into a global economic and military force. The rapid development led to major geopolitical shifts which particularly affect India. Despite economic bonds, India and China maintain a history of opposition and mistrust, starting with the 1962 border war and continuing through current confrontations on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)<sup>30</sup>. The repeated objections of China to bilateral agreements alongside its forceful behaviour in disputed territories created tense diplomatic relations, which made East Asia an important strategic sector for India. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi perceived the policy changes, he launched the “Act East Policy” in 2014 as a revamped version of the original policy. The Act East Policy brought strategic emphasis to defence collaboration and political alliances and regional connectivity, while the earlier policy focused only on economic engagement. The fundamental purpose of this policy

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<sup>29</sup> Ji, Xianbai, *Mega-regionalism and great power geo-economic competition*, (London: Routledge, 2021). <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003177067/mega-regionalism-great-power-geo-economic-competition-xianbai-ji> (Last Accessed September 25, 2024)

<sup>30</sup> Chuong, Nguyen Anh, Tran Xuan Hiep, Nguyen Tuan Binh, Nguyen Hoang Hue, and Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao, ‘Competitive strategy of India and China in Southeast Asia and its impact on the region’, *Croatian International Relations Review*, vol. 28, no. 89, 2022, pp-225-245. <https://cirrj.org/menuscript/index.php/cirrj/article/view/511> (Last Accessed September 25, 2024)

relies on ASEAN centrality because India seeks to build stronger bonds with Southeast Asian countries. The Act East framework focuses on maritime security and cultural exchange initiatives alongside infrastructure development projects that involve the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation programs. India has strategically realigned its East Asian approach through a combination of economic expansion and protection of its interests in the growing regional disputes that shape this region.

### ***What are India's Core Interests in East Asia?***

India has redirected its attention toward the South China Sea because of its strategic requirements together with the fundamental right of maritime navigation and essential energy resource availability. This region serves as a fundamental international shipping route which has become a strategic hotspot because of conflicting territorial disputes and increasing Chinese power expansion. India considers the SCS as a vital territory which unites strategic concerns with economic value. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) report (2022) shows that the Strait of Malacca enables the transit of more than 55% of Indian trade to its South China Sea destination. The issue of free and secure navigation around this region remains essential because it combines economic importance with national defense requirements<sup>31</sup>.

From a Neo-Kautilyan strategic standpoint the South China Sea positions itself in India's first outer concentric circle so that any military rise or instability threatens Indian strategic interests and may cause disturbances in the Indian Ocean which India views as its native diplomatic sphere. Rising tensions between China and other regional claimants in the SCS along with Vietnam and the Philippines substantially elevate the chances of conflict that threatens trade routes and regional stability.

### **4.2. China's Rise, Economic Dependencies, and India's Trade Dynamics**

The regional and worldwide power balance has changed dramatically as China becomes a major geopolitical and economic force in East Asia and beyond. American strategists such as Professor Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan previously anticipated China would participate cooperatively inside the liberal international framework. China was expected to search for a

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31 MEA report, 2022. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36286\\_MEA\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2022\\_English\\_web.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36286_MEA_Annual_Report_2022_English_web.pdf) (Last Accessed June 5, 2024)

bigger but still regional role that would challenge but not replace U.S. dominance in the Western Pacific. But this presumption has been more foolish.

However, China has pushed aggressively and now seeks superpower status under the leadership of Xi Jinping. In 2017, Xi said China was now "taking the centre stage of the world" and had entered a "New Era".<sup>32</sup> This drive is visible in military expansion, economic policies, diplomatic outreach, and rhetoric as well as in the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which between 2014 and 2018 acquired more vessels than the navies of Germany, Britain, Spain, and India taken together. Such vast military expansion shows China's strategic vision to project force much beyond its conventional geographic range<sup>33</sup>.

### *China's Trade Volumes and Economic Dependencies*

China's development is firmly anchored in economic growth, and not only in military and diplomatic spheres. Today, China is the single largest trading partner of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the 10 ASEAN members, making China the largest economic force in the region. And more significantly, China maintains a trade surplus with each and every one of these countries, therefore supporting their reliance on the Chinese market for consumer goods as well as industrial inputs.

Consider Japan: significantly more than the amount it buys from the U.S. or the larger G7 bloc, about 40% of its industrial and consumer goods are imported from China. Similar trends are shown by South Korea and ASEAN countries. This close interconnectedness puts regional economies vulnerable to geopolitical leverage and Chinese supply chain choices<sup>34</sup>.

Furthermore, solidifying China's dominance is its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), started in 2013. From \$443.6 billion in 2013 to \$975.3 billion by 2022 trade between China and ASEAN countries almost doubled. Concurrent with this, China's largest share—26.6%—of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has become a main source of funding for

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<sup>32</sup> Bajpae, Chietigj, *China in India's Post-Cold War Engagement with Southeast Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2022). <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780367480066/china-india-post-cold-war-engagement-southeast-asia-chietigj-bajpae> (Last Accessed August 21, 2024)

<sup>33</sup> Carnegie Endowment Report, May 22, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/?lang=en> (Last Accessed August 21, 2024)

<sup>34</sup> Nikkei Asia report, July 10, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/> (Last Accessed September 19, 2024)

regional infrastructure projects. From 47 members in 2015, the AIIB today comprises 106 countries from humble beginnings<sup>35</sup>.

Still, worries about political meddling never go away. Bob Picard, the Canadian Communications Director of AIIB, had resigned in 2023 citing excessive interference by the Chinese Communist Party and even personally by Xi Jinping. His successor, a senior CCP official, stoked more questions about how China's economic institutions might support more general geopolitical goals.

### ***India's Trade Figures in the Region***

Unlike China's strong economic presence, India's trade ties with East Asia and the ASEAN area are expanding but still somewhat small and uneven.

With India importing \$17.69 billion and exporting just \$5.15 billion, India-Japan trade for FY 2023-24 came at \$22.85 billion, resulting in a notable trade deficit. Similar trends apply to South Korea: overall trade in 2022–23 comes out to be \$27.8 billion, with Indian imports at \$19.64 billion once more favouring Korea.<sup>36</sup>

Though more in absolute terms, the trade link between India and ASEAN also shows similar disparity. Bilateral trade in 2022–23 was \$131.5 billion; India's purchases (\$87.57 billion) greatly exceeded its exports (\$44 billion), hence producing still another significant trade deficit.

These trade numbers highlight a structural asymmetry: China gains from surpluses and increased dependency while India finds it difficult to balance her regional trade accounts. This influences India's strategic leverage in a region progressively moulded by China's aggressive economic diplomacy as well as its economic might.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> State Council Information Office, China, 2022. <http://english.scio.gov.cn/> (Last Accessed December 30, 2024)

<sup>36</sup> Dreyer, June Teufel, 'Movement but Minimal Progress', *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2024. [https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A7%3A336935/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A181905448&crl=c&link\\_origin=scholar.google.com](https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A7%3A336935/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A181905448&crl=c&link_origin=scholar.google.com) (Last Accessed April 11, 2025)

<sup>37</sup> Steel, A. N., Source: *Nikkei Asia*, 4 October 2022. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-deals/Nippon-Steel-to-buy-U.S.-Steel-for-over-14bn> (Last Accessed April 11, 2025)

## 5. Pursuit of power: belligerence and aggression in China's regional strategy

### 5.1. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is more than simply a worldwide infrastructure development project; it is a deliberate part of Beijing's larger geopolitical strategy. Although marketed and sold as a way to promote economic cooperation and connectivity across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond, the BRI also acts as a strategic vehicle for projecting Chinese power, increasing influence, and, maybe, reshaping world power relations on China's terms.

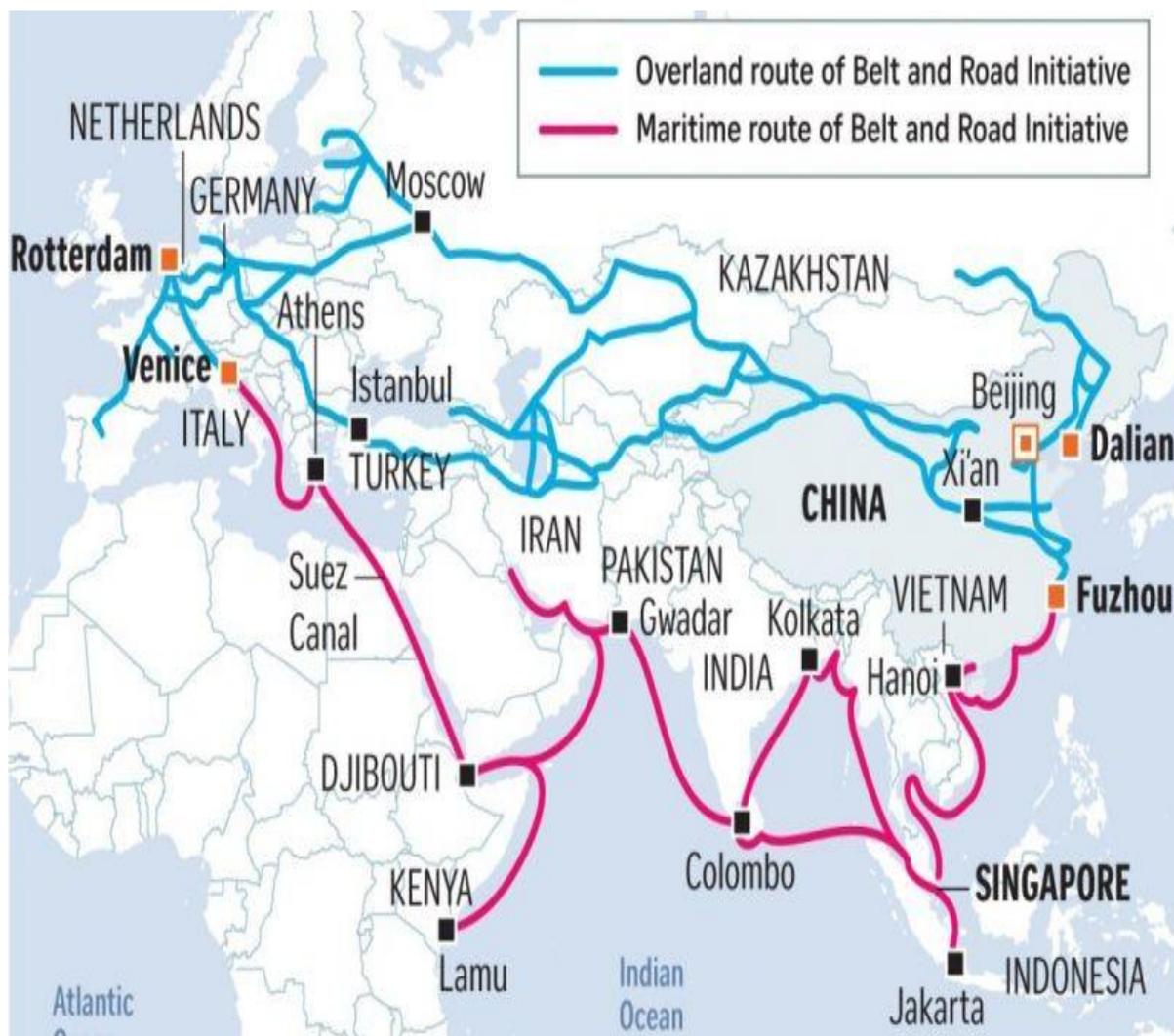
Comprising two main parts, the project is the Silk Road Economic Belt, which creates overland trade routes across Central Asia to Europe, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which builds sea-based infrastructure and connectivity throughout Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Europe. These paths taken together create a huge worldwide network that not only supports commerce but also grounds China's position in important areas.

But under the surface of development discourse lies a more forceful desire. Often via loan diplomacy, the BRI lets China acquire vital assets—ports, railroads, oil pipelines—in geopolitically vulnerable places. Often, nations that depend much on Chinese loans and investments find themselves politically allied with Beijing or compromising on strategic choices. Handed over to China on a 99-year lease because of debt repayment concerns, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port acts as a warning sign.

Furthermore, the growth of BRI into Africa, Oceania, and Latin America indicates China's desire to contest Western hegemony and create a multipolar world in which it plays a prominent part. NATO allies and those in the Indo-Pacific area have expressed concern about this growth, which they view as a tool for military dual-use infrastructure development as well as an economic project perhaps allowing Chinese naval or logistics bases overseas<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Liu, Feng, 'Balance of power, balance of alignment, and China's role in the regional order transition', in *Navigating International Order Transition in the Indo-Pacific*, (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 35-57. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003431930-3/balance-power-balance-alignment-china-role-regional-order-transition-feng-liu> (Last Accessed February 20, 2025)



*Figure 4. BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE*

## 5.2. Nine-Dash Line and Chinese claims

China's Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea is a major geopolitical issue in Asia. The Nine-Dash Line represents China's sweeping maritime claims to approximately 90% of the 3 million square kilometre South China Sea, which lack a legal basis. The People's Republic of China officially accepted the line in the 1940s, and it remains its maritime border.

China uses strategic ambiguity in regional affairs with its uncertain claim. China has not formally designated the boundary as historic waters, EEZs, or sovereign territory<sup>39</sup>. This

<sup>39</sup>Klajbl, Ondřej, 'The Clash of Maritime Claims in the South China Sea', (Univerzita Karlova, Fakultasociálníchvěd, 2024), Bachelor's Thesis. <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/192465>(Last Accessed January 3, 2025)

vagueness leaves regional neighbours and the international community in legal and strategic uncertainty and allows Beijing interpretation and enforcement leeway.

China rejects the decision and militarises artificial islands and patrols the disputed seas despite international opposition, including the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling under UNCLOS that found China's claims were unfounded<sup>40</sup>. China's rejection of international law shows its aggression and preference for territorial expansion over multilateral cooperation.

China claims the Spratly and Paracel Islands, often at the expense of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China's construction of military bases and airstrips on artificial islands shows its desire to protect resource-rich areas and grow naval power across Southeast Asia.

Some Chinese academics perceive the line as a foundation for resource rights—fishing, oil, gas—while others see it as complete sovereignty, implying China considers the South China Sea its domestic territory. This reading threatens international marine rules, regional sovereignty, and free navigation.

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<sup>40</sup> Diener, Alexander C., and Joshua Hagen, 'Bordering the South China Sea: Maritime Claims, Contested Sovereignty, and Novel Territorialities' in *Invisible Borders in a Bordered World*, (London: Routledge, 2022) pp. 82-104. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429352515-6/bordering-south-china-sea-alexander-diener-joshua-hagen>(Last Accessed April 15, 2025)



### 5.3. China's reclamation of land in South China Sea



Figure 6 Friar, Karen. *China's Artificial Islands in Before-and-After Photos: Developments Are in What U.S. Considers International Waters*. Published January 4, 2016

This before-and-after satellite image (Figure 6) captures the dramatic transformation of Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands, showcasing the scale of China's aggressive land reclamation activities.<sup>41</sup> According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), the site was originally a submerged reef within the Union Banks, covering an area of only 7.2 square kilometres. Over time, it has been artificially expanded by approximately 100,000 square meters, converting what was once a nearly invisible outcrop into a fully developed man-made island.

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<sup>41</sup> Zhang, Ketian, 'Explaining China's large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 46, no. 6-7, 2023, pp. 1185-1214. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2022.2040486> (Last Accessed December 25, 2024)

The "before" image shows the reef in its natural form—submerged and surrounded by shallow turquoise waters, with minimal infrastructure. In stark contrast, the "after" image reveals an extensive island featuring constructed buildings, docking facilities, and pathways. This reflects not only strategic military development but also a broader assertion of territorial control in the disputed South China Sea. Such developments are central to China's strategy of "incremental encroachment", where physical transformation is used to reinforce geopolitical claims.

*China's artificial Island building*



Figure 7. Flor Cruz, Michelle. *South China Sea Land Reclamation: Satellite Images Show Chinese Progress on Man-Made Island*. Published February 17, 2015

This before-and-after satellite image (Figure 7) highlights China's expansive land reclamation project at Gaven Reef, one of the contested features in the Spratly Islands of the South China Sea. The image on the left, dated 31 March 2014, shows the original state of Gaven Reef—a natural coral formation with a small garrison structure. However, by 7 August 2014, as seen in

the image on the right, the reef had been transformed into a significantly expanded artificial island, with clearly visible infrastructure and strategic enhancements.

According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), China began actively developing this reef in early 2014, although it had maintained control over it since 1988. The transformation involved taking a small military outpost and expanding it into a platform measuring approximately 300 meters by 250 meters. This massive expansion was carried out using dredging technology, which extracted sand and coral from the seabed to artificially increase the landmass.

The “after” image reveals a dredged channel for maritime access and an artificial island with constructed facilities. This platform now includes space for ship docking and possibly military installations, including gun emplacements. In total, an estimated 114,000 square meters of land has been added by China’s dredging efforts at this reef alone.

#### 5.4. Contextualising China’s belligerence and objectives

China’s regional strategy increasingly reflects an ambition to establish a ‘China-centred Asia’, where it aims to be the sole dominant power, often encapsulated in the metaphor “the only tiger in the mountain”<sup>42</sup>.

This strategy is evident in both East Asia and along the India-China border, where four key incidents (2 each in East Asia and the India-China border) demonstrate China’s assertive, pre-emptive, and militarized approach to redrawing the geopolitical landscape.

In East Asia, the following prominent actions stand out:

(i) *South China Sea – Nine-Dash Line Assertion*

China’s attempt to unilaterally assert sovereignty over nearly the entire South China Sea through its “Nine-Dash Line” claim has led to significant maritime tensions. Despite a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that invalidated this claim, China continues

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<sup>42</sup> Jebb, B., ‘China’s Use of Force in Territorial Disputes: Discontinuities Between Land and Sea’, *Journal of Public & International Affairs*, 2023.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=1070521X&AN=177890725&h=INEyo05cj5HYVrXOKi2%2F18cwMY3sUsXqhMA13aYJV6xabok2AH%2Flu0wQoP%2FsoiyQsTU4YyPojnrrsKO6jVVzug%3D%3D&crl=c> (Last Accessed August 13, 2024)

extensive militarization and land reclamation on disputed reefs and islands, ignoring international norms and the rights of Southeast Asian nations<sup>43</sup>.

(ii) *East China Sea – Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)*

In 2013, China declared an ADIZ over the East China Sea, covering the Senkaku/Diaoyou Islands, which are also claimed by Japan. This unilateral move escalated tensions with Tokyo and the U.S., as it effectively sought to control airspace over international waters, prompting global concerns about freedom of navigation and overflight.

On the India-China border, two significant confrontations highlight China's land-based assertiveness:

(iii) *Doklam Plateau – 2017 standoff*

At the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction, China's unilateral attempt to construct a road in the disputed Doklam Plateau triggered a military standoff with India. The incident marked a direct challenge to Indian strategic interests and Bhutan's territorial claims, showcasing Beijing's willingness to revise the status quo through on-ground alterations.

(iv) *Galwan Valley – 2020 clash in eastern Ladakh:*

In a major escalation, Chinese PLA troops clashed violently with Indian forces in Eastern Ladakh's Galwan Valley, resulting in casualties on both sides. The incident represented China's continued expansionist posture and an attempt to alter the Line of Actual Control (LAC) through salami-slicing tactics.

**Two common features** unify these four assertive actions:

1. **Pre-emptive initiation:** In all cases, China was the first mover, taking unilateral steps to alter the territorial or strategic status quo without international consensus.
2. **Tri-Service involvement:** Each action saw the involvement of all three branches of the Chinese military—the People's Liberation Army (PLA), PLA Navy (PLAN), and PLA

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<sup>43</sup> Regilme, S. S. F., 'Southeast Asia and the Militarization of the South China Sea' in *The United States and China in the Era of Global Transformations* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), pp. 47-72. <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/edcollchap/book/9781529228472/ch003.xml> (Last Accessed September 20, 2024)

Air Force (PLAAF)—underscoring the coordinated and full-spectrum nature of China’s regional power projection.

Together, these actions reflect a calculated, long-term effort by China to reshape Asia’s security architecture in its favour, often at the expense of its neighbours’ sovereignty, regional balance, and international norms.

## 6. Strategic perceptions: How India and China interpret each other

### 6.1. Contextualizing India-China Relations

India-China relations today have shifted from the age-old idiom of “Peaceful Existence” to “Confrontational Coexistence”. Serious strategic disputes combined with mistrust make up the evolving bilateral relationship, which spans across the areas of South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region as well as the Himalayas and East Asia and the South China Sea and the wider Indo-Pacific region<sup>44</sup>. Despite their status as major Asian powers, both nations are compelled to break an ancient Chinese proverb - "One mountain cannot hold two tigers" (Yìshānbùróngèrhǔ) because of their emerging strategic competitions. Since the 1962 war, India and China reached their lowest point in bilateral relations after the 2020 Galwan Valley clash caused severe erosion of trust while massively intensifying military confrontation<sup>45</sup>. The Indian government demands that normal bilateral relations can prevail only if peace prevails at the LAC and if the two countries fall back on the previously held positions. Global and regional cooperation between China and India remains unstable since the parties have not found a satisfactory solution yet<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Balachandran, Vappala, *India and China at Odds in the Asian Century: A Diplomatic and Strategic History*. (United Kingdom: Hurst, 2025).

[https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=fxNEEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=From+2015+to+2022,+bilateral+trade+surged+by+almost+90%25+until+China+overtook+the+US+as+India%27s+top+trading+partner+with+US%24+118.4+billion+in+FY+2023%E2%80%9324&ots=gcQ5jKwSJ7&sig=JzkuNo0Iuq6VeexcTTg357f5CH8&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=fxNEEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=From+2015+to+2022,+bilateral+trade+surged+by+almost+90%25+until+China+overtook+the+US+as+India%27s+top+trading+partner+with+US%24+118.4+billion+in+FY+2023%E2%80%9324&ots=gcQ5jKwSJ7&sig=JzkuNo0Iuq6VeexcTTg357f5CH8&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false) (Last Accessed November 14, 2024)

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence, Maj Dustin, ‘Clash in the Gray Zone’ *Military Review*, 2024.

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Nov-Dec-2024/Gray-Zone/Gray-Zone-UA.pdf> (Last Accessed April 9, 2025)

<sup>46</sup> Narlikar, Amrita, ‘India and the world’ *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, 2024, p. 337.

[https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5V0QEQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA337&dq=India%27s+first+China+strategy+under+PM+Modi+emphasises+mutual+respect+and+equality.+During+his+2015+Beijing+visit,+Modi+advocated+for+a+%22equals%22+alliance+between+India+and+China&ots=qToW4Mi-W-&sig=SsLIXNKZT3efXFZqI5RrgSigvPo&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5V0QEQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA337&dq=India%27s+first+China+strategy+under+PM+Modi+emphasises+mutual+respect+and+equality.+During+his+2015+Beijing+visit,+Modi+advocated+for+a+%22equals%22+alliance+between+India+and+China&ots=qToW4Mi-W-&sig=SsLIXNKZT3efXFZqI5RrgSigvPo&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false) (Last Accessed May 4, 2025)

INDIA CHINA BILATERAL TRADE (Figures in USD Bn)							
Year	India's Export to China	%Change	India's Import from China	%Change	Trade Deficit	Total Trade	%Change
2015	13.4	-18.39	58.26	7.42	44.86	71.66	1.42
2016	11.75	-12.29	59.43	2.01	47.68	71.18	-0.67
2017	16.34	39.11	68.1	14.59	51.76	84.44	18.63
2018	18.83	15.21	76.87	12.89	58.04	95.7	13.34
2019	17.97	-4.55	74.92	-2.54	56.95	92.9	-2.93
2020	20.87	16.15	66.78	-10.87	45.91	87.65	-5.64
2021	28.03	34.28	97.59	46.14	69.56	125.62	43.32
2022	17.49	-37.59	118.77	21.70	101.28	136.26	8.47

(Source: General Administration of Customs, China)

Figure 8 India-China bilateral trade 2015-2022

The above table shows During 2015-2022, India-China bilateral trade grew by 90.14%, an average yearly growth of 12.87%. In fiscal Year 2023-24, China became India's largest trading partner surpassing the US. Bilateral trade stands at US\$ 118.4 billion; but trade deficit stands at US\$ 85 billion in China's favour<sup>47</sup>.

## 6.2. How Does India View China?

India is gradually defining its strategic response to Chinese aggression in East Asia through its active involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, which spans from eastern Africa to the western Americas. As tensions with China rise, especially along the Himalayan border and through Beijing's expansionist aspirations in the South and East China Seas, India has found strategic convergence with the US and like-minded democracies, reaffirming its commitment to a Free, Open, Inclusive, and Rules-Based<sup>48</sup>.

When Mr. Modi visited China for the first time in 2015 after becoming the Prime Minister, he declared that India-China bilateral relations needed to operate on a basis of equality. According to the Joint Statement between the two sides, PM Modi states "Moving forward we need to focus on both our relationship's huge prospects, but we must solve every source of doubt which

<sup>47</sup> Florio, Massimo, Simona Gamba, and Chiara Pancotti, 'Mapping of long-term public and private investments in the development of Covid-19 vaccines', *Eur Parliament COVI Committee*, 2023, pp.1-95. [https://www.startmag.it/wp-content/uploads/IPOL\\_STU2023740072\\_EN.pdf](https://www.startmag.it/wp-content/uploads/IPOL_STU2023740072_EN.pdf) (Last Accessed February 12, 2025)

<sup>48</sup> Lin, Hsiao-Chen, 'Allies in the Making: India's Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific Strategy' *Journal of Indian & Asian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2024. [https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A6%3A27889030/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A181471303&crl=c&link\\_origin=scholar.google.com](https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A6%3A27889030/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A181471303&crl=c&link_origin=scholar.google.com) (Last Accessed January 15, 2025)

generates unease or mistrust in our partnership". (MEA, 2015). India views the 21st century from the prism where both India and China have returned as dominant world powers since they will develop their relations at equal levels. Commenting on India-China relations, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that the current state of India-China relations can be classified as "Abnormal" following the Doklam standoff and the Galwan clash.

### 6.3 Does China view India as a threat?

Officially, China maintains that India does not pose any threat to its security interests. However, Chinese academic and strategic communities started conducting a reassessment about India following the Doklam standoff (2017).

- Yin Guoming suggested that India is the "second biggest" threat to China after the US and that "China needs to re-assess, re-examine, and reformulate its India strategy";
- Li Yang argued that China's biggest mistake in the past two decades has been to "underestimate India and ignore India";
- Shen Dingli counted the Doklam crisis among "China's top-five diplomatic failures" under the so-called "Xi-style Diplomacy"

### 6.4 How Does India Interpret China's Strategy?

India sees China as more focused in East Asia and the Pacific vis-à-vis the US and could interpret Chinese strategy via two strands:

1. For China, the first road, and the most obvious one, could run through its home region, specifically the Western Pacific. The focus will be on building regional primacy as a springboard to global power.
2. The second road defies historical laws of strategy and geopolitics. This approach focuses less on building a position of unassailable strength in the Western Pacific, but more on outflanking the U.S. alliance system and force presence in that region by developing China's economic, diplomatic, and political influence on a global scale.
  - ❖ In both the above scenarios, **replacing the US as the 'Numero Uno' power** and creating a **China-led Regional Order (first)** and a **Global Order (eventually)** are viewed as China's core objectives.
3. In a third possible scenario, India is wary of China's plans to encircle India (String of Pearls) and become an equal, if not a bigger power, in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); this will be a nightmare for India strategically speaking.

## 7. Indo-Pacific and India's strategic counter to China in East Asia

### 7.1 India-US Relations: New Delhi aligns with Washington in the Indo-Pacific

The US and India share a common regional perspective and ideals such as 'Freedom of Navigation', 'Free Trade and Commerce', 'Prosperity for All' and a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. The goal of countering China unites both nations while the US repeatedly urges India to increase its role and presence in the region. Both India and the United States are establishing strong military and strategic relationships throughout the region alongside countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia to counter Chinese aggression. Bipartisan US support for India enables both the enhancement of India's defense partnership and the arms transfers of high-tech weaponry while Indo-Pacific stands as one of the main cooperation domains along with the Indian Ocean Area. The US has designated India as its 'Major Defense Partner' in 2016 and both nations have signed their essential defense agreements including BECA, GSOMIA, LEMOA and COMCASA.

### 7.2 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) or the Quad

India bases its Indo-Pacific strategy around the non-institutional Quad framework, which exists as a partnership between India, Japan, the US and Australia. India has also established 2+2 Dialogues with all the member states of Quad. Quad exists as a security meeting platform which officially denies an anti-China stance even though its primary focus centres on China. Quad also intends to establish an alternative model of development from the Chinese BRI while maintaining sustainable growth practices without Chinese coercive diplomatic tactics. The Malabar naval exercises conducted by the Quad members presents a strategic challenge for China as the Chinese authorities are quick to publicly criticize the drills prior to and after their execution. China criticizes the Quad by calling it an 'Asian NATO' and opposes the group using the name 'military region militarization' while denouncing it<sup>49</sup>.

However, critics say that India serves as the weak link of the Quad coalition as they argue that India prevents the grouping from becoming an out-an-out military alliance. To understand India's strategy within the Quad, it is imperative to point out two variables which underline India's Quad strategy. Firstly, India wants the Quad to become not merely an anti-China

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<sup>49</sup> Rafique, Sadia, and Ahsan Shah, 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: India's Strategic Ambiguities in the Indo-Pacific Region', *UCP Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, (HEC Recognized-Y Category) vol. 2, no. 2, 2024, pp. 19-33. <https://ojs.ucp.edu.pk/index.php/jhss/article/view/48> (Last Accessed March 31, 2025)

military alliance but to execute multiple objectives beyond China's containment. It views the Quad as a platform to strengthen its role and influence in the region and obtain technology transfers and weapon sales while reducing dependency on China and also seek markets for its products. Secondly, India is wary of getting drawn into a military conflict with China because of the USA as it also realises that it needs to peacefully manage relations with China which is essential in solving the long-standing border dispute. Thus, India refuses to join hostile military groups against China because this would lead to antagonizing relations with China<sup>50</sup>.

### 7.3 India-Japan Relations

India and Japan are two nations which have borne the brunt of Chinese expansionist policies at land and sea, respectively. There is no historical baggage to India-Japan ties, as the relations between the two have been devoid of any conflicts. As such, there is no element of 'mistrust' or 'threat perception' between the two sides. As members of the Quad, Both New Delhi and Tokyo plan to develop an alternative model for development for Asia and Africa in contrast to the Chinese-led what is known as 'Debt Trap' diplomacy. Both the nations espouse common values and ideals emphasizing a 'Rules-based Inclusive, International Order' and 'Free Navigation for Asian Seas' throughout the region toward China. Japan stands as one of India's most trusted economic and strategic partners, which has elevated to even higher levels because Prime Minister Modi shared excellent personal relations with his former Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe<sup>51</sup>. The Modi-Abe bonhomie has already been highlighted in an earlier section of this paper. Both the leaders sought to establish 'Stable Asia' while preventing any regional dominance by China; they intended to present neighbouring nations with an alternative developmental path encompassing Southeast Asia Indian Ocean Region and Africa ('Japan-India Leader's Summit, Tokyo,2014'). Ties between both nations advanced from a level of 'Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2006 to 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2014 which led them to conceptualise and align their Indo-Pacific strategies. The geopolitical, economic and strategic interests of India and Japan align through India's Act East policy and

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<sup>50</sup> Pradhan, Sanjay Kumar, 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Maritime Security: An Indian Perspective', *Indian Studies Review Journal of Centre for Study of Politics and Governance Delhi*, vol.1, no.2, pp. 36-47. [https://www.cspgindia.com/\\_files/ugd/b59e98\\_fc455e17ebbb4c18bc44daeaba6085ab.pdf#page=40](https://www.cspgindia.com/_files/ugd/b59e98_fc455e17ebbb4c18bc44daeaba6085ab.pdf#page=40) (Last Accessed March 10, 2025)

<sup>51</sup> Choudhury, Srabani Roy, ed. *India-Japan Partnership: Abe the Game Changer*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2024). [https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mfgQEQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1967&dq=7.3.%09India-Japan+Relations&ots=q5En5U\\_Dk3&sig=kTPL-bNZgwj0J3wvRY9OiiqoJ80&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=7.3.%09India-Japan%20Relations&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=mfgQEQAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1967&dq=7.3.%09India-Japan+Relations&ots=q5En5U_Dk3&sig=kTPL-bNZgwj0J3wvRY9OiiqoJ80&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=7.3.%09India-Japan%20Relations&f=false) (Last Accessed November 10, 2025)

Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). Former PM Shinzo Abe presented India as the key element in his 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity' design to safeguard against Chinese aggressors.

#### 7.4 India steps up in the South China Sea

Through PM Modi's 'Act East' policy, India has finally boosted its role and presence in the South China Sea as well as the East Asian Region. India has abandoned its former policy of remaining 'neutral' on the South China Sea disputes and elevated naval partnership agreements with states such as Vietnam and the Philippines<sup>52</sup>. A very significant development was the recognition and affirmation of the Indian government in June 2023 of the 2016 decision made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that established the rights of the Philippines over China in the South China Sea.

For the first time ever, the Indian Navy conducted joint exercises with U.S., Japanese and Philippine navies in May 2019 within the South China Sea<sup>53</sup>. Also for the first time, the Indian Navy conducted joint military drills with Vietnam and the Philippines as well as Malaysia, Australia and Indonesia during August 2021 in the South China Sea. Another first was when the Indian Navy deployed warships to take part in a two-day naval exercise with seven ASEAN navies in the South China Sea during May 2023.

#### 7.5 Enhancing security ties with Vietnam and the Philippines

Both Vietnam and the Philippines face China over the South China Sea disputes and thus seek India's presence to play a balancing role. In one of its biggest defence deals, India initiated its largest defense export deal by consenting to sell BrahMos missiles to the Philippines in 2022, and delivery of some initial batches was completed in 2024<sup>54</sup>. Also, there are ongoing talks of delivering BrahMos missiles to Vietnam as well. India gifted the now decommissioned INS Kirpan (a Khukri-class missile corvette) to Vietnam in 2023. India has also sent a Defence

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<sup>52</sup>Atmakuri, Archana, and Chayanika Saxena, 'Strategic Calculations: India's Prudent Entry into the South China Sea', in *India and China in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024), pp. 167-186. . [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-6903-2\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-6903-2_8) (Last Accessed December 5, 2025)

<sup>53</sup> Butt, Khalid Manzoor, and Sadaf Jan Siddiqui, 'Growing Chinese Presence in the Indian Ocean', *Strategic Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2021, pp. 64-81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732275> (Last Accessed October 17, 2025)

<sup>54</sup> De Castro, Renato Cruz, 'Preventing the Philippines from pivoting toward China: The role of the US-Japan security alliance', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2023, pp. 381-399. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20578911221148005> (Last Accessed September 9, 2025)

Attache to the Philippines and given an extended 'Line of Credit' for the purchase of more defence equipment. Indian naval and coast guard forces are also providing training and equipment to their counterparts in Vietnam and the Philippines to ready them against Chinese naval and coast guard confrontations<sup>55</sup>.

## 7.6 India's Defence Cooperation with Taiwan

Indian foreign policy towards Taiwan is changing delicately yet tactically. To improve its national security and strategic planning, New Delhi is boosting its defence and intelligence exchanges with Taiwan through public restraint on geopolitical issues. India quietly defies Chinese political limitations by boosting its ties with Taiwan. Indian engagement with Taiwan is a key strategic development avenue to counter Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific. With Taiwan, India has strategically moved through secret security collaboration and intelligence sharing instead of public political relations despite supporting the "One China" policy and not officially recognising Taiwan<sup>56</sup>.

The Taiwanese forces have essential information about Chinese military strategy and battlefield tactics, which is of interest to India's strategic community. The Indian Army believes Taiwan's PLA expertise may aid it in future Himalayan confrontations against China along the Line of Actual Control.

In August 2023, three former Indian Defence Chiefs visited Taipei which shows growing military ties between the two nations. The two thinktanks, United Services Institute (USI) of India and Taiwan's INDSR held military games in New Delhi<sup>57</sup>. In presence were U.S. military experts who also participated in South China Sea and Himalayan war simulations. In the war

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<sup>55</sup> Steinbock, Dan, 'Trilateral Militarisation in Southeast Asia: Bringing Vietnamese Counterinsurgency Operations to the Philippines and the South China Sea', *Eurasia Review*, 22 April 2024. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dan-Steinbock/publication/380006092\\_Trilateral\\_Militarisation\\_in\\_Southeast\\_Asia\\_Bringing\\_Vietnamese\\_Counterinsurgency\\_Operations\\_to\\_the\\_Philippines\\_and\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea/links/662792e243f8df018d21e5a8/Trilateral-Militarisation-in-Southeast-Asia-Bringing-Vietnamese-Counterinsurgency-Operations-to-the-Philippines-and-the-South-China-Sea.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dan-Steinbock/publication/380006092_Trilateral_Militarisation_in_Southeast_Asia_Bringing_Vietnamese_Counterinsurgency_Operations_to_the_Philippines_and_the_South_China_Sea/links/662792e243f8df018d21e5a8/Trilateral-Militarisation-in-Southeast-Asia-Bringing-Vietnamese-Counterinsurgency-Operations-to-the-Philippines-and-the-South-China-Sea.pdf) (Last Accessed December 13, 2025)

<sup>56</sup> Basu, Pratinashree, and Soumya Bhowmick, 'India-Taiwan Economic Ties: Synergies, Challenges, and Strategies', *Taiwan Politics*, 2025, pp. 1-14. <file:///C:/Users/gdas3/Downloads/127681-india-taiwan-economic-ties-synergies-challenges-and-strategies.pdf> (Last Accessed August 5, 2024)

<sup>57</sup> Reghunadhan, Ramnath, 'India-Taiwan Relations: Exploring Science and Technology Diplomacy as a Tool for Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century', in *Navigating India-Taiwan Relations in the Digital Age: Surveying the Theory and Practice of Science and Technology Diplomacy*, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), pp. 15-51. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-96-2018-0\\_2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-96-2018-0_2) (Last Accessed January 26, 2025)

simulations, to analyse spillover effects, the then Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan studied how a Taiwan Strait conflict would affect the region.

The U.S. has influenced India to realise that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would threaten its strategic interests. After defeating Taiwan, Beijing would focus on its border disputes with India, notably around Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh.

The DPP's election victory in January 2024 and Lai Ching-te's appointment as Taiwan's president has the potential to improve bilateral relations. Despite Chinese criticism, Prime Minister Modi and President Lai exchanged congratulatory messages on platform X, which was considered a rare diplomatic move<sup>58</sup>.

## Conclusion

Both India and China desire to lead Asia. China envisions a Sinocentric Asia with Beijing controlling politics, economics, and security. India supports a multipolar Asia based on sovereignty, inclusivity, and international law by opposing Chinese hegemony. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar declared in 2022 that "The Asian Century (a century lead by India and China together) calls for a good management of the contradictions of our continent... its main players have to discover a *modus vivendi*." India is uneasy about China's aggression and refuses to compromise on shared interests. India's strategic outlook suggests that India-China competition in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific will only intensify and increase as it strengthens its alliance with the US and reinforces the Quad. India wants to boost its footprint in East Asia, join coordinated naval patrols, and further enhance relations with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other ASEAN nations. This represents India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative, naval outposts, and infrastructure diplomacy in India's backyard—the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia. The U.S.-led Indo-Pacific security framework has strengthened India's response to China's strategic backyard as part of a bigger counterbalancing effort.

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<sup>58</sup> Keerthiraj, and Takashi Sekiyama, 'The Rise of China and Evolving Defense Cooperation between India and Japan', *Social Sciences*, vol.12, no. 6, 2023, pp. 333. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/6/333> (Last Accessed May 9, 2025)

However, India's aspirations impose logical limits. Despite growing distrust, several East Asian nations depend on China economically. China's huge trade network and investment strength influence regional economic patterns, which India's growing economy cannot match, time, money, and security bandwidth constrain India's ambitious East Asia policy. As of today, the dream of an India-China-led 'Asian Century' seems unrealistic. India and China's geopolitical rivalry and lack of coordination make the regional order likely to be a hostile cohabitation rather than a cooperative rise. A truly Asian-led global century will remain an aspiration until Asia's two behemoths achieve a truce.

Given the current phase of thaw in India-China relations, both sides should look to solve their outstanding issues through talks and diplomacy. They should use this window of opportunity to iron out their differences and take care of each other's core concerns. For example cross-border terrorism for India is a core concern, and China should do everything in its power to influence Pakistan. However, India will find it a bit challenging to navigate the current turn of events as the US has announced its 'G2' partnership with China. As such, India might not be able to rely on the US much, either to contain China or defend itself against Chinese aggression, especially under current US dispensation. Talking specifically about East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, it can be safely said that the contestations and competition between India and China will only intensify from hereon. However, both the nations should display diplomatic maturity in not allowing the discord between them to induce them to a larger conflict.

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