

India's Indo-Pacific Strategic Outlook: Limitations and Opportunities

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KANCHI MATHUR, JUL 25 2024

Over the last decade, India has become one of the most sought-after regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region. The country has embraced its role as a security provider of the Indian Ocean region and is a preferred diplomatic partner of emerging regional powers of Southeast Asia. A cornerstone of India's strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific is the relationship it shares with the United States. Being major defence partners, India and the US hope to use their long-term partnership to build a more integrated Indo-Pacific. As such this has made India a key linchpin in its latticework of allies and partners in the region. However, as India's strategic and diplomatic responsibilities get more pronounced, there continue to be limitations with lingering challenges that threaten to slow down India's plans.

India's Strategic Outlook on the Indo-Pacific Region

In the Indo-Pacific region, there are three theatres of specific concern for India. First is the Northwest Indian Ocean region which includes the Gulf of Aden and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in the Arabian Sea, Second is the Indonesian Archipelago which encloses the Straits of Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda, Third is the Southern African region whose waters merge into the Indian Ocean.

As per the Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015, across the Indian Ocean, India's role is that of a first responder and preferred security partner of major powers such as the United States, and regional powers such as Australia, and Japan. Considering that nearly 9.84 billion tons of cargo passes through the Indian Ocean region annually. India's threat perception acts as a key determinant of whether a nation would be considered a partner or a challenger to the established order within the Indo-Pacific region. India's credibility as a security provider is powered by the nation's independent diplomatic and strategic relations. The fact that India has been able to manage a thriving relationship with both the United States and Russia for more than two decades gives confidence to other emerging powers in the region to collaborate with India and formulate independent, mutually beneficial relationships in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

States within the Indo-Pacific region are liable to resist deeper economic and strategic associations directly with the US due to concerns that increased dependence on the US may lead to interference by the nation in long-term policy making, particularly about national security. This tension between the emerging powers of the Southeast and the major powers of the West can be mitigated by countries that are major economic and strategic powers of the Indo-Pacific in their respect. India is a valid contender for the same.

India's Priorities in the Indo-Pacific Region

Over the last decade, under the guise of being a security provider, India has become primarily responsible for containing and combating trafficking and piracy across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The nation has been involved in naval vigilance since 2008 and is currently underway to introduce 12 warships for anti-piracy and anti-trafficking operations across its three theatres of interest. For the Gulf of Aden and Bab-el-Mandeb, India plans to deploy 2 warships. It aims to continue its strong strategic partnership with major regional powers of the sub-region, namely Israel. In the Indonesian Archipelago and Southern Africa, India plans to deploy 10 warships, each. As a

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consequence, five major choke points of the Indian Ocean region shall see the permanent deployment of warships. It is subsequently converting India as a nation with a rising capability to take affirmative action to ensure the safety of the IOR.

Currently, at its disposal, India has Sea Guardian drones, naval vessels powered by P-8I surveillance aircraft and Marcos commandos at its warship. In coming years, the country wishes each warship to carry a detachment of marine commandos, on-board helicopters, with 31 MQ-9B armed High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and long-range surveillance aircraft. Through initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) and Samudra Setu Missions, India has worked with its neighbours across the Indian Ocean Region and has been involved in mission-based deployments across the region since 2017. In the coming years, India wishes to continue building a collective maritime competence with its neighbours and partners across the Indo-Pacific and integrate it with Western forces and capabilities.

Over the last five years, India has started to view security developments in the South China Sea as intrinsically linked to the Indian Ocean region. Analysts argue that India should use its maritime preparedness to get access beyond the first Island chain, the straits of the Indonesian archipelago to spread its influence across the South China Sea. With its increased association with the United States on advanced maritime defence technologies, India aims to enhance its naval preparedness and capabilities to handle critical waterways. One such example is the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative (IPMDA).

An important aspect of achieving stability in the Indo-Pacific is ensuring stability in its sub-regions. In the case of India, that would be South Asia. While analysts argue that India, with support from Western powers such as the US, could prove to be a diplomatic balancer to China in the region, contentions at the India-China border, continue to distract India from achieving its greater objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. Analysts argue that China follows a 'string of pearls' policy wherein it has established military and commercial bases and ports across the Indian Ocean littoral states, such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar port in Pakistan. In opposition to this, India developed the 'necklace of diamonds' strategy which aims at increasing naval presence and strengthening diplomatic relationships between major Indian Ocean littorals and India. Arguably encircling China as a consequence. The two nations have shared a contentious border since the Sino-India War of 1962. China's aggressive expansion across its LAC with India along with an aggressive military buildup in Tibet under the guise of infrastructural development and sub-regional policing has created an atmosphere of distrust between the two nations. Currently, most analysts argue in favour of the likelihood of clashes between India and China in four out of five buffer zones along the countries' friction points along the LAC. Moreover, post the 2020 Galwan crisis, China has been invested in creating permanent markers on contested territories of eastern Ladakh to exert control and claim over the areas.

Therefore, one of India's likely primary strategic objectives is recognising China as a primary security threat. To support this, analysts suggest that India expand its investments in frontline jet engines and increase the SSBN (Ballistic Missile Submarine) and SLBM range to be able to match up to China's rising aerial defence and offensive capabilities. Separately it may be imperative for India to close its infrastructural gap at its eastern corridor. However, as India expands its defence and security alliance with the United States, the country will likely present a stronger strategic posture at its border with China. Considering that the 2022 US National Defence Strategy categorically supports "ally and partner efforts to address acute forms of grey zone coercion from the PRC's campaigns", a hasty attack on India's eastern flank through the LAC seems unlikely in the medium term.

A close ally of China, Pakistan takes cues from its all-weather friend to contribute towards a tense situation at its shared border with India. Analysts observe that China uses the Pakistan challenge as an irritant to unnerve India's defence. The threat of a security crisis concerning Pakistan is largely managed and can primarily be credited to the latter's severe political instability, and financial downfall over the last decade. Regardless, Indian threat perception continues to anticipate a sudden attack by Pakistan and China at all three fronts, naval, airborne and at its shared borders.

Furthermore, analysts contend that as India increases its defence partnerships and builds a more diversified defence network hopefully more inclusive of the IOR territories, China is likely to influence Pakistan to engage in skirmishes

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along the India-Pakistan border, especially at Jammu and Kashmir. Considering this, India is liable to work towards establishing a maritime theatre command which covers both the seaboard within the Indian Ocean region, one structured towards China and one oriented towards Pakistan. Both seaboard will likely be powered with joint logistics and interoperable intelligence surveillance systems.

In Southeast Asia, India wishes to be a trusted and dependable security partner. The country holds 'ASEAN Centrality' as essential to the emerging regional architecture for the Indo-Pacific. In May 2023, India inaugurated its first-ever maritime exercise with ASEAN. India exercised with naval ships from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Along with this, India has increased its partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

In July 2023, India transferred its naval ship INS Kripan along with 1450-tonne Khukri class missile corvettes manned by 12 officers and 100 sailors. The transfer was done as India recognised Vietnam as a 'preferred security partner' in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Indian government has taken up the onus of increasing the training of Vietnamese military personnel operating submarines and fighter jets. Separately, India has also enhanced its association with the Philippines and recognized the nation's sovereignty over its claims in the South China Sea by delivering the supersonic Brahmos anti-ship cruise missile along with an integrated logistics support package and training for manning the systems, in April 2024.

A crucial association for India in the East China Sea area is Japan. The two nations share a "special strategic and global partnership" in the Indo-Pacific region. India and Japan recognised the increased relevance of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific Ocean in global trade. The agreement on reciprocal provision of supplies and services between the self-defence forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces ensures active collaboration between the security forces of both nations

Moving towards the Pacific, India has had a long-lasting association with major Pacific Island Countries such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea. A recent interaction between India and PIC was noted at the third instalment of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in May 2023 at Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. Subsequently, India and PNG engaged in bilateral-level talks on enhancing maritime cooperation between the two countries. Amidst the PIC, India holds a position of credibility and accountability, which is increasingly being capitalised by major powers interested or invested in the sub-region. India's role in the Western Pacific has been gradual. One of the most important associations the country holds is with Australia. In the year 2023, bilateral trade between the two nations were recorded at USD23.02 billion. In addition, the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement was entered into force in December 2022. Furthermore, the two countries upgraded their bilateral relationship from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2020.

Role of the US in Determining India's Strategic Orientation in the Indo-Pacific

The last decade has seen a dynamic shift in US strategic orientation towards the Indo-Pacific region. In the 1950s, the US's foreign policy and strategic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region were part of a 'hub and spokes system'. The system promoted distinct bilateral agreements between the US and regional powers across APAC, particularly East Asia such that the United States stayed central to most diplomatic and security arrangements within the region. However, as the United States pivoted towards an Indo-Pacific conceptualization in 2012, it became a rising challenge for the nation to continue associations through its existing 'hub and spokes' system. Primarily because of China's diplomatic prowess in the region, increasingly contested the US. For this reason, over the last decade, the nation has enhanced its associations with major regional powers of the Indo-Pacific, primarily Japan, India, and Australia to work towards a latticework framework. The US aims to establish a multilayered network fostering a collection of smaller 'likeminded' groupings that collaborate on security and are committed to a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. With regional groupings such as the QUAD, ASEAN and AUKUS, the US forges closer partnerships between emerging powers of the region and linchpin states of each sub-region, namely, India, Japan, Australia, and itself.

The US must utilise its association with major regional powers of the Indo-Pacific to reach out to other emerging

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powers. For this, India holds the potential to act as the bridge between major powers of the West and emerging powers of the Indo-Pacific, who are keen to retain the authenticity of their national interests while employing the assistance of global strategic players to effectively manage China's ongoing or likely assertiveness at their maritime borders. The India-US bonhomie has led to the two nations' coordinated promotion of the QUAD, I2U2, IPEF and ICET as an organisations responsive to the economic and strategic needs of its members and other associated powers of the Indo-Pacific region.

A growing aim of the two nations is to advance India's indigenous defence production capacity. According to the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, a resilient India which empowers stability across South Asia is of immense value to the United States. In September 2023, US-based defence corporations approved the co-production of GE F414 Fighter Jet Engines between US-based GE Aerospace and India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited. In November 2023, India and the US discussed the co-development and production of the Stryker Infantry Combat Vehicle in India at the sidelines of the Indo-US 2+2 Meeting. The India-US defence collaboration aims to accelerate the indigenous defence ecosystem of the former by scaling up commercial technology with military applications and increasing investments by US and Indian companies through start-up accelerator programs.

India and the US have tried to facilitate multiple logistics and communication agreements. One such agreement is the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IP-MDA) which enables regionwide sharing of satellite-based radio frequency between India and the United States. Analysts also note a nascent cooperation between the two countries in identifying vulnerabilities in semiconductor supply chains. As major defence partners, India conducts more exercises and personnel exchanges with the US than with any other nation. The most notable ones are the Sangam and the Tiger Triumph exercises. Sangam is a naval special forces exercise between the US Navy SEALs and the Indian Navy's Marine Commando Force and Tiger Triumph is the first-ever tri-service exercise in the Bay of Bengal on enhancing interoperability for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations.

At the multilateral level, India and the US participate in the MALABAR, RIMPAC and MILAN. However, As China continues to assert its influence across the South China Sea and aims to enhance its diplomatic footprint in the Eastern Pacific, it may be time for India and the US to develop several multilateral security partnerships with emerging powers of the areas, particularly with the Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam. Considering that India increasingly recognises the freedom of the SLOCs in the South China Sea as under its emerging strategic purview, increased multilateral security arrangements shall work towards increasing India's credibility as a major stakeholder of the region. At the same time, multilateral/trilateral partnerships which are inclusive of but not limited to the United States shall encourage regional powers wary of choosing between the US and China. India's presence in said partnerships promotes the narrative of nations collaborating on shared agendas but at the same time retaining their strategic autonomy. This may particularly be true for countries towards the Eastern Pacific, such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

For the United States, India is the country with whom a partnered relationship unlocks the doors to emerging powers of the Indo-Pacific region. Conversely, a partnership with the US puts India on a diplomatic pedestal across the region, making it a favoured strategic and diplomatic friend across the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, having India as a partner and a key architect of its latticework arrangement in the Indo-Pacific, the US hopes to counterbalance Beijing's expansive regional ambitions.

Limitations of India's Strategic Outlook in the Indo-Pacific: Directions for the Future

Despite the emerging convergences between India's strategic priorities and those of the West in the Indo-Pacific, there are four challenges that continue to plague the country's rise as a major regional power. First, India's long-term fear of antagonising China: For the longest time Indian strategists and policymakers have had a lingering fear of disturbing its delicate peace with China at its shared borders, in case it decides to take a hardened stance against the country's aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in South China Sea and towards Taiwan. While India does not need to enmesh the US into its territorial disputes with China, resilient support on the part of the United States towards Indian territorial claims in the Northeast, will reduce Chinese adventurism at the LAC. Conversely, shortly, it may become imperative for India to recognise China's strong-arming Taiwan and the

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Philippines at their shared maritime border. A lukewarm recognition of the security challenges within the South China Sea might cost India its credibility among emerging regional powers.

Second, prioritising defence priorities: Despite its recent strides in defence procurement, development and export, India continues to lack sufficient equipment to guard its borders and at the same time act as the security provider for the Indo-Pacific. The most important gaps continue to be in the country's anti-submarine warfare. Analysts contend that the Indian naval force suffers from delayed acquisition of submarines as well as anti-sub missiles with most submarines in the current fleet nearing end. Furthermore, analysts argue that India's longest-range missile, Agni-V has a range of 5000 km and cannot cover China. (Rajagopalan *et.al* 2023) Currently, INS Arihant is underpowered and is only armed with a K-15 Sagarika SLBM which has a range of 750 km. Practically land-based missiles need to range of 7000 km to effectively balance China. Furthermore, the recent increase in China's nuclear warheads, to 500 warheads, in 2024 has also made it imperative for India to take into account its defensive capabilities.

Third, removing barriers to a prospective defence relationship: Considering that India and the United States are major defence partners with foundational cooperation in the same, it is only logical to argue that for India to reduce its dependence on the Russian defence industry swiftly, then its future defence readiness needs to be powered by the US. However, bureaucratic hurdles and red tape continue to slow the progress of defence imports. Along with this, investment caps, limitations on ownership, and an overall overcautiousness about national security continue to slow down development.

Fourth, strategic calculation of incentives: In the coming decade, it may become increasingly necessary for India to pick a side. The country may need to officially recognise its strategically multi-aligned foreign policy 'tilt' towards the United States and its friends in the West. This may impact cooperation between India and Western powers in emerging technologies, defence modernization, and artificial intelligence (AI). Moreover, the nation's reluctance to let the QUAD graduate into a defence partnership threatens to stagnate its growth from a major regional power to a global power in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

While the growth of India's strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific, in the last decade is a testament to the effectiveness of the country's 'strategically autonomous' policy. The country's continuing defence collaboration with the US shall assist India in achieving greater competency in maritime and airborne domain awareness. That said, the nation needs to take note of the limitations to its growth. Indian policymakers need to address the current drawbacks in the country's naval competency and work towards ensuring that India continues to have an independent and strong naval presence in the region with the capability to present resilient support to its national interests in the coming decade. Furthermore, keeping in mind the delicate balance India has maintained in its association with the US, China and Russia, it is liable that in the medium term, the country may have to justify its credibility as a promoter of a free and open Indo-Pacific. If India continues to balance its strategic interests and obligations against its fear of generating China's ire, the country may lose out on key strategic associations in the Indo-Pacific. Eventually, it may be time for India to recalculate its ability to risk its position in the emerging latticework.

About the author:

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