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# ACTING EAST: INDIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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DHRUVA JAISHANKAR\*

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## Executive summary

India's "Act East" Policy evolved from its prior "Look East" Policy during the 2000s in response to China's rise and assertiveness, the inadequacies of the post-Cold War security order, and India's growing capabilities. The Act East Policy differs from the Look East Policy in three ways: it has moved beyond primarily economic objectives to encompass security and other realms, its focus has widened from Southeast and Northeast Asia to the entirety of the Indo-Pacific, and the urgency and priority of its efforts have been elevated. The objective of the Act East Policy is to preserve a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. It increasingly involves four elements: securing the Indian Ocean, integrating with Southeast Asia, deepening strategic partnerships with other balancing powers (the United States, Japan, Australia, France, Russia, and others), and managing differences with China. While considerable progress has been made in each of these areas, and India can build upon an often-overlooked history of leadership in Asia, New Delhi will need to do much more to ensure that its stated objective of a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" is met. This will require steps to improve naval acquisitions, defense exports, overseas project implementation, air connectivity, regional trade, and investment screening.

## Introduction

On January 26, 2018, the 68th anniversary of India becoming a republic, New Delhi hosted the leaders of all 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – from the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte to Indonesia's Joko Widodo, Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi to Thailand's Prayuth Chan-ocha. For India, Republic Day has begun to assume a diplomatic significance, featuring a foreign head of state or government as the chief guest for the commemorative festivities. Recent chief guests have reflected India's foreign policy priorities: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama in 2015, and French President Francois Hollande in 2016. But the appearance in 2018 of not one but 10 leaders from Southeast Asia was a major demonstration of the growing importance that India accords its "Act East" Policy.<sup>1</sup>

The Act East Policy remains the subject of considerable confusion both in India and overseas, for several reasons. First, it is not a doctrine spelled out in an official Indian government document, such as a white paper, although its contours are clearly discernible, including in speeches by senior officials.<sup>2</sup> Second, the Act East Policy represents the rebranding of an earlier Look East Policy, which arose in the early 1990s. The differences between the two have not always been made clear.<sup>3</sup> Third, the Act East Policy has often been lost amid a number of related, but distinct, strategic initiatives and concepts adopted not just by India but by other countries. There is particular confusion over India's recent adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategic concept, its relationship with the separate "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategies of Japan and the United States, and conflation with the quadrilateral security dialogue (or "quad") involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

But in fact, the Act East Policy is rather specific about its ends, ways, and means. India's Act East Policy evolved naturally from the Look East Policy as a direct consequence of the nature of China's rise; the inadequacies of the regional security order in Asia; and India's own growing capabilities, profile, and obligations. By "Acting East," India can play a meaningful role in managing China's rise, incentivising its evolution into a more transparent, market-driven, status quo-oriented, and norm-abiding power. It can also help to shape the regional order in a manner that is advantageous to Indian interests. Act East consequently represents the securitization of India's eastward engagement, reflects a wider scope that encompasses the Indo-Pacific region, and heralds a greater urgency. It is meant to preserve a favorable balance of power by ensuring a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. The Act East Policy has antecedents, and India can build upon its earlier history of leadership in Asia between 1947 and 1962.

Looking ahead, India's Act East Policy will involve at least four elements. One, India will have to secure the Indian Ocean region against greater security competition through better maritime domain

awareness, improved naval capabilities and presence, enhanced infrastructural and capacity development, and greater institutional leadership. This is at the core of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's slogan for the Indian Ocean, SAGAR ("security and growth for all in the region").<sup>4</sup> Two, India will have to accelerate its diplomatic, economic, and military integration with Southeast Asia in order to preserve a stable balance of power in the region. This would complement attempts to preserve the institutional centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but will also require working bilaterally with Southeast Asian countries on security, trade, and connectivity. Three, India will have to deepen its strategic partnerships with other countries that share its concerns about the manner of China's rise, especially the United States, Japan, and Australia, but also France, Russia, and others. Fourth, India will have to manage relations with China, mitigating differences while seeking avenues for engagement whenever possible. Finally, in addition to continuing with ongoing efforts, India will need to prioritise a number of new areas, including regional trade, naval acquisition, overseas project implementation, defense exports, air connectivity, and foreign investment screening. The following paper provides an overview of historical antecedents for India's reengagement with the region, outlines the driving factors for India's Act East Policy, describes the conceptual evolutions of Act East and the Indo-Pacific, details the four elements of India's Act East Policy to date, and, in conclusion, identifies priority areas for future Indian policy.

## IN BRIEF: INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

Preserving a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific

### Rationale

- China's rise and assertiveness
- Inadequacies of security order
- India's growing capabilities

### The Indo-Pacific concept

- Strategically unites Indian & Pacific Oceans
- Emphasizes maritime domain
- Elevates (implicitly) India's role

### From "Look East" to "Act East" policy

- More comprehensive (including security)
- Wider scope (Indo-Pacific)
- Greater urgency

### I. Securing the Indian Ocean

- Maritime domain awareness
- Naval operations and capabilities
- Infrastructure and capacity building
- Regional institutions

### II. Integrating with Southeast Asia

- Institutional integration
- Military relations
- Commerce and connectivity

### III. Strategic relations with balancing powers

- The United States
- Japan
- Australia
- Others (Russia, France, UK, etc.)

### IV. Managing relations with China

- Bilateral security
- Regional security (Belt & Road Initiative)
- Bilateral trade and economics
- Multilateral cooperation and norms

### Future policy priorities

- Accelerate naval acquisitions
- Facilitate regional trade
- Enhance overseas project implementation
- Boost defense exports
- Improve air connectivity
- Attract but screen investments

## A forgotten history: India's reengagement

India's current and future engagement with the Indo-Pacific can build upon a rich tradition of Indian regional leadership, even if this past is not always well appreciated within India. In the pre-colonial era, Indian engagement with Southeast and Northeast Asia was primarily through the prisms of trade and religion. The temple complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the deep cultural importance of the Ramayana in Indonesia, or the Champa ruins in Vietnam offer reminders of this, as does the spread of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Korea, and Japan. Gunpowder, semi-precious stones, horses, and paper were some of the commodities and technologies that were exchanged along maritime trade routes. During the colonial period from the 16th century onwards, India's regional interactions assumed different forms. Parts of Southeast Asia were governed from India, including Burma, Malaya, and Singapore. Indian troops were deployed against the Boxer Rebellion in China and in Burma and Singapore during World War II. Indian financial links extended to Hong Kong and Shanghai, and commodities – notoriously opium and tea – were also exchanged between India and China.

If these developments have had a lasting legacy, independent India's role in a wider Asia is more often forgotten. It may be little appreciated today, but as a newly independent country, India played a rather remarkable role as a leader in Asia. In 1947, India found itself the largest independent and unified Asian state. China was still in the midst of a civil war between Communist and Kuomintang forces, Japan was recovering from the devastation of World War II, Korea had been partitioned, and Indonesia, Indochina, Burma, and Malaya were not yet fully independent. India's attempt at staking a leadership role for itself began even before it achieved independence in August 1947. In March and April of that year, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, hosted a major Asian Relations Conference in Delhi. It was an idea that Nehru had discussed previously with Burmese leader Aung San, and efforts were made at considerable risk and cost to secure participation from the likes of Vietnam and Indonesia. "Asia is again finding itself," Nehru declared at the conference, while specifically acknowledging delegations from China, the Arab world, Iran, Indonesia, Indochina, Turkey, Korea, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Tibet, regions across South, Central, and Southeast Asia, and even observers from Australia and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

It was not simply as a normative leader that India engaged Asia in the 1950s. In fact, it played a surprisingly active political and diplomatic role across the region, including on China, Korea, Japan, and Indochina. After the Korean War broke out in 1950, India served as a backchannel between the United States and Communist China, in the absence of diplomatic relations between the two sides. It was an important role but one that, in fact, generated greater suspicions of Indian intentions in both Washington and Beijing. In 1950, after a midnight meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai, India's Ambassador to Beijing, K.M. Panikkar, warned Western diplomats that China intended to enter the

Korean War if the Americans crossed the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>6</sup> His warning went unheeded, and China entered the conflict. Later, having already provided medical support to the U.S.-led United Nations forces, India headed the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC), which repatriated prisoners of war between North and South Korea.<sup>7</sup> (An Indian flag still flies in front of the Korean War Memorial in Seoul.) Soon afterwards, India was also involved in Indochina, including negotiations to ensure Laotian neutrality, and in leading the International Control Commission to implement the Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the sharpest demonstration of India's clout in Asia was the 1955 Asian-African Conference, better known as the Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia. Over the objections of several members, including the hosts, India insisted on China's participation, at a time when Beijing was still viewed with great suspicion in Asia. The conference itself resulted in a set of agreed statements that condemned colonialism and established principles of peaceful coexistence. As an American newspaper noted about Bandung, "[A]t last the destiny of Asia is being determined in Asia, and not Geneva, or Paris, or London, and Washington. Colonialism was out and hands off is the word. Asia is free. This is perhaps the historic event of our century."<sup>9</sup>

India also helped facilitate Japan's re-entry into the international community. New Delhi had refused to sign the San Francisco Peace Treaty between Japan and the victorious powers of World War II, which it deemed unfair, and instead brokered a separate agreement a year later to restore ties with Tokyo. Following visits by the Japanese and Indian prime ministers to each other's countries in 1957, India became the first recipient of yen-denominated loans from Japan, at a time when many countries were still chafing from Japan's wartime atrocities. Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi's grandson, Shinzo Abe, who would become Japan's prime minister in 2006 and again in 2012, would later warmly recount, "As a young boy seated on his knee, I would hear [my grandfather] telling me that Prime Minister Nehru introduced him to the biggest audience he had ever seen in his lifetime."<sup>10</sup>

It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that this leadership role for India in Asia began to fade. This was the result of several factors. The first was that the Indian economy started to see a downturn, particularly following a foreign exchange crisis after the implementation of the second Five-Year Plan. Secondly, some of the goodwill and credibility that India had developed as a neutral arbiter began to erode after 1955, in part due to India's criticism of Western actions during the Suez Crisis and its failure to condemn the Hungarian Revolution. ("By kowtowing to Russia we have abdicated our moral pretensions," an Indian journalist wrote at the time.)<sup>11</sup> Relations with the West were further complicated by Pakistan's inclusion in regional security agreements such as the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Finally, the mishandling of relations with China – a consequence of questions over Tibet, a misreading of Chinese intentions, and lack of military preparedness – resulted in the disastrous 1962 Sino-Indian border war. This



brought to an end the notion of a shared anti-colonial platform, ideas of peaceful coexistence in Asia, and Indian leadership in the developing world.

In the succeeding three decades, from about 1962 to 1992, India often found itself excluded from major developments in Asia, and was instead preoccupied within a more constrained South Asian context. Just as Japan experienced rapid economic recovery in the 1960s and was followed by the four Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), India's state-controlled economy, characterised as the "license-permit-quota Raj," experienced slower growth. India viewed the U.S.-led alliance network, the evolution of ASEAN as an anti-communist bloc, and the U.S.-China rapprochement in the early 1970s with a great deal of scepticism. At the same time, the notion of "Asian values" propagated by leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and later Mahathir Mohamed in Malaysia excluded India. As a consequence, by the time the Cold War came to an end, India found itself outside the economic and security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region – including in groupings such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

A significant series of steps between 1991 and 1996 helped establish what became known as the "Look East Policy." Initially, it had an explicitly economic purpose: to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from Asia's fast-growing economies as India recovered from a balance of payments crisis.<sup>12</sup> But it was not just capital that India's Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao sought as he travelled to China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia during this period; he also sought an alternative economic model.<sup>13</sup> These efforts were initially limited, although India did receive significant official development assistance (ODA) from Japan. South Korean companies were among those to successfully enter an increasingly liberalised Indian market. And because "Looking East" was a less contentious way of embracing market forces and cooperating with U.S. allies and partners, it paradoxically also became a way for India to "Look West."<sup>14</sup> In 1992, India established official contacts with ASEAN.

Normalised relations with China also followed. India and China had re-established full diplomatic ties at the ambassadorial level in 1976, but the following decade had seen differences, including a military stand-off at Sumdorongchu in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, following Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China, India and China conducted successful negotiations to establish border management mechanisms to preserve peace and tranquillity.<sup>15</sup> In 1998, normalization was momentarily set back as India conducted a series of nuclear tests, with China's nuclear weapon program used as a partial justification. Nonetheless, by 2003, Indian and Chinese leaders had managed to paper over differences and economic relations took off. Bilateral trade, which was negligible at the turn of the millennium, swelled to over \$65 billion by 2013-2014.<sup>16</sup> But despite the normalization of ties with China, challenges also arose – challenges that eventually resulted in India having to Act East in the Indo-Pacific.

## The challenge of China's rise

India's economy has performed well since its initial liberalization in 1991, and has experienced sustained high rates of growth. However, in this period China's economy has performed markedly better. It has pulled the largest number of people out of poverty in history, with the percentage of poor dropping from 66% to less than 1% between 1990 and 2015.<sup>17</sup> In the process, China has created a massive, billion-strong consumer class – an enormous urbanized population that is increasingly well-educated and well-employed. From Shanghai to Guangzhou, Shenzhen to Chongqing, Tianjin to Xiamen, the country's metropolitan centers offer gleaming, vibrant, futuristic cityscapes. And contrary to perceptions about its economy being driven by polluting factories, cheap manufactured goods, and low-wage labour, China has evolved into a hub for research, innovation, and technological development. As part of China's newfound success as a middle-income and industrialized country – as well as its “Go Out” policy since circa 2000 – it is only natural that it now plays a major role in virtually every international issue. It is the world's largest manufacturer, largest energy consumer, largest exporter, and largest greenhouse gas emitter. It is the largest trade partner for many countries around the world, as well as a foreign investor, aid provider, and source of technical expertise. Its defense spending has also increased, and Chinese forces now operate farther afield in anti-piracy operations, military exercises, and peacekeeping missions, including in East Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic Sea.

China's rise has created exciting new opportunities for other international actors – including India. Indeed, China's rise has helped as a pacesetter for India, showing what is possible for a similarly large country that was at a comparable level of development as recently as the early 1990s. It has also helped to open space on global governance forums, with China and India (along with Brazil and Russia) advocating for better representation for emerging economies on matters of global governance, including at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. As such, India has cooperated with China at the BRICS Summit, the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the BASIC coalition (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) in negotiating a global climate change agreement. The entire world, including India, benefits materially as well from China's rise. Its low-cost manufacturing – particularly in areas such as electronics and other manufactured goods – has helped to keep down costs for consumers the world over.

However, despite all of these developments, China's rise still generates considerable anxiety in India, in Asia, and around the world. In fact, China presents a challenge to the prevailing international order in at least four ways. First, its opaque system of governance would not be a problem for an isolated or introverted state, but generates concerns when China's decisions have global repercussions. Second, its state-managed economy creates imbalances and market distortions, allowing China to

derive various benefits from its economic and trade partners while not offering reciprocal benefits. Its support for national champions in certain industries, sometimes nominally private companies that have the backing of the state, creates an uneven playing field with foreign competitors. Non-tariff barriers, massive state subsidies, and high and uncertain levels of debt create further distortions. Third, while China is not alone in having territorial disputes in its region, it has made revisionist attempts to gain control over territory in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Himalayas, often using non-military means such as island building, road construction, fishing fleets, and civil aviation. And fourth, it has ignored accepted international conventions when it comes to freedom of navigation, proliferation of nuclear and missile technology, cyber security, and even outer space. These factors all contribute to the shared concerns that many countries, including India, have about China's rise.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond these factors, there are several challenges that China poses specifically to India. The first is bilateral security, mostly related to the longstanding boundary dispute. China's ability to mobilize its military on the border has improved significantly, and it still makes occasional forays into disputed territory in a bid to change the facts on the ground. When challenged by Indian patrols, Beijing selectively interprets past legal treaties and agreements, conveniently ignoring those that do not support its case.<sup>19</sup> The second element is regional security, where the differences are even wider. India harbors deep distrust of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which it assesses to be a strategic project designed for political or security gains. India has boycotted BRI due to concerns about both sovereignty – as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor traverses Indian-claimed territory – and the sustainability and transparency of the initiative.<sup>20</sup> Such concerns have been realized in places like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, where Indian security has been undermined.<sup>21</sup> The third challenge concerns economic relations and trade, where the deficit has widened in China's favor. While previously optimistic, Indian business is increasingly concerned that China does not offer a level playing field for India in areas where it has a comparative advantage, such as information technology services and pharmaceuticals. Today, India's annual trade deficit with China is almost as large as India's total defense budget.<sup>22</sup> The fourth area concerns global governance, where India and China have increasingly found themselves at loggerheads, whether on terrorism, export control regimes, freedom of navigation, or UN Security Council reform, although various degrees of cooperation persist on issues like climate change, multilateral trade, and humanitarian intervention. In many areas, such as freedom of navigation, India and China have gravitated towards different sets of norms.<sup>23</sup> While the boundary dispute and regional security differences have been longstanding concerns, bilateral economics and multilateral affairs had until recently represented two areas of considerable cooperation.

On all four aspects of India-China relations, a widening disparity in interests and perspectives is discernible. This appears to be primarily an outgrowth of China's self-conception as a great power, particularly following the global financial crisis of 2008 and President Xi Jinping's ascent to power a few years later, rather than any specific approach to India. Nonetheless, India is at the forefront in bearing the brunt of China's newfound assertiveness, whether on the boundary, Belt and Road, trade, or global governance. There will continue to be issues on which both India and China find convergence. There will also be times when both sides decide to recalibrate the tenor of their relationship, if not always the substance, as occurred in late 2017 and early 2018. But unless China adopts a fundamentally different approach to global leadership, and by extension a different approach to its relations with India, New Delhi will have to continue to prepare for a more competitive relationship with Beijing.

The manner of China's rise and its assertive behavior are compounded by two other developments. The first is the inadequacy of the post-Cold War regional security order. The recessed nature of major powers between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s allowed smaller states in Asia to lead the institutional regional architecture, with the consequent centrality of ASEAN. Meanwhile, the security order was underpinned by a Cold War-era U.S.-led hub-and-spoke alliance system, involving a U.S. presence or network in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia. Both these realities, legacies of an earlier era, have proved inadequate in countering Chinese assertiveness. The second reality is India's own rise, which, while occurring in the shadow of China's, is nonetheless a major geopolitical development in its own right. China's rise, the deficiencies of the regional security order, and India's own growing capabilities have collectively required changes to India's approach to the region.



## Demystifying concepts: Act East & the Indo-Pacific

It was in the mid-2000s – just as economic and trade relations between India and China were taking off – that renewed concerns about China's rise began to dictate India's eastward engagement. As a result, India's ties with Southeast and Northeast Asia started to become more comprehensive, with a more pronounced security focus. This was most readily discernible in the emerging security relationship between India and Japan after 2006 but also in growing military-to-military contacts with the United States. Secondly, the scope of India's eastward engagement widened, extending from the Indian Ocean to the Western and Southern Pacific, as China's own influence expanded. This in turn required India to imagine a larger neighborhood. Third, increased urgency in responding to China's actions necessitated more activity, clearer deliverables, and shorter timelines. These important additional features of the Look East Policy – a greater security focus, larger scope, and stronger deliverables – led to a new name: the Act East Policy.<sup>24</sup> While used earlier by others, the need to 'Act East' was officially articulated by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on a visit to Singapore in August 2014, and reiterated in an address to Indian Heads of Mission in Hanoi later that month.<sup>25</sup> If the original objective of Look East was to accelerate India's economic development with Asian assistance, the objective of Act East is to preserve a favorable regional balance of power by ensuring a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

What exactly is the Indo-Pacific? As part of the transition from Look East to Act East, the wider strategic scope required a shift in vocabulary. The origins of the term Indo-Pacific lie in the biological sciences. But its recent strategic use can be traced to a speech delivered in August 2007 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Indian Parliament. Abe did not use the phrase Indo-Pacific, but rather alluded to a book by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh in describing the "dynamic coupling" of the Indian and Pacific oceans as the "confluence of the two seas."<sup>26</sup> It was around this time – both before and after Abe's speech – that Indian strategists began to use the term Indo-Pacific in commentaries. In October 2010, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the importance of the "Indo-Pacific basin...to global trade and commerce."<sup>27</sup> The Indian strategic expert C. Raja Mohan, in his 2012 book *Samudra Manthan*, argued that "the seas of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean must be seen as a single integrated geopolitical theatre, the 'Indo-Pacific'."<sup>28</sup>

Shortly thereafter, India and other countries began to officially adopt the term. The 2013 Australian "Defence White Paper" led its strategic outlook with an assessment of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh referenced the Indo-Pacific in a May 2013 speech in Tokyo.<sup>30</sup> In 2016, Abe's government in Japan outlined a vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific."<sup>31</sup> Australia's 2017 "Foreign Policy White Paper" made numerous mentions of it, and it was officially acknowledged by ASEAN in 2019.<sup>32</sup> In a January 2017 address to the Raisina Dialogue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that India "believe[s] that respecting freedom of navigation and adhering to international norms

is essential for peace and economic growth in...the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>33</sup> At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, Modi gave the clearest articulation of India’s Indo-Pacific approach. He argued that the Indo-Pacific was neither a strategy nor an exclusive club for India, but rather it was a “natural region” extending “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas.” He argued that it should be “free, open, and inclusive;” defined by “rules and norms...based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few;” and characterized by respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight.<sup>34</sup> Among other steps that followed, the Ministry of External Affairs created a new Indo-Pacific division in 2019, incorporating the multilateral elements of the erstwhile Indian Ocean and ASEAN Multilateral divisions. It encompasses such groupings as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the East Asia Summit, the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC), and certain political-military functions.

Somewhat belatedly, in 2017, the United States under President Donald Trump began to describe the Indo-Pacific as a priority region, including in its December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS).<sup>35</sup> There were earlier antecedents, including during the Barack Obama administration, of regarding the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single strategic unit. It was evident, for example, in a U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region agreed to by Obama in New Delhi.<sup>36</sup> But the new U.S. Indo-Pacific articulation was partly a consequence of Indian (and Japanese and Australian) efforts, and not the other way around. Trump himself first used the term in his joint statement with Modi in June 2017, which described their two countries as “democratic stalwarts in the Indo-Pacific region,” and the first detailed articulation by his administration of an Indo-Pacific policy was then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s speech in Washington before his maiden visit to India.<sup>37</sup> While this was relayed in security policy – symbolized by the rebranding of the U.S. Pacific Command to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command – the economic dimensions of the Indo-Pacific were further detailed by Tillerson’s successor Mike Pompeo.<sup>38</sup> The biggest manifestation of this was two pieces of legislation: the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) and the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which potentially allowed the United States to channel up to \$60 billion in strategic overseas infrastructure investments. By 2018, it was clear that the Indo-Pacific had become firmly lodged in the official strategic vocabulary of India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, as well as other countries such as Indonesia and France.<sup>39</sup>

Although the exact use has differed among these countries, some overlap is discernible. First, and most importantly, Indo-Pacific implies that the Indian and Pacific Oceans are a single, shared strategic space. What happens in one has implications in the other. Thus the militarization of the South China Sea directly affects India, just as developments in the Indian Ocean have immediate consequences for Japan or the United States. The fact that China’s navy has begun to operate in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans makes this conception both a reality and a necessity. Second, the use of the term Indo-Pacific suggested that geopolitical competition in the broader region will play out primarily in

the maritime domain. By defining the region by its oceans, rather than by any continental features (e.g. Asia), Indo-Pacific automatically elevates the maritime element of strategic thinking about the region, although not at the complete expense of developments on land. It helps planners think more seriously about maritime trade, the blue economy, and naval requirements and capabilities, although continental concerns continue to play a prominent role in many countries' thinking. Third, although the "Indo-" in Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian Ocean and not India, it is impossible to think about the Indo-Pacific without considering the role of India. Given its central location, its status as the littoral's largest economy, its long coastline, and its blue water naval capabilities, India is the geopolitical keystone of the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the use of the term Indo-Pacific implicitly acknowledged India's role in regional security and commercial dynamics.<sup>40</sup>

The Act East Policy consequently represents the securitization, increased scope, and greater urgency of India's prior Look East policy, and the Indo-Pacific highlights the wider geography, centrality of the maritime realm, and importance of India in the regional balance of power. If the purpose of Act East is to ensure a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, how can this be achieved? It will require at least four elements. First, India must act to secure the Indian Ocean region, where military competition risks escalation. Second, it must begin to play the role of a balancer – even if it is unlikely to be *the* balancer – to China in Southeast Asia and the connecting seas between the Straits of Malacca and Taiwan. It will need to act in the political, security, and economic realms. Third, India must deepen strategic partnerships with like-minded and capable maritime powers who share India's concerns about China's rise, particularly the United States, Japan, and Australia, but also Russia and European powers. And fourth, India must manage the relationship with China, not yielding on core Indian interests while seeking avenues of beneficial cooperation whenever they present themselves.

## I. Securing the Indian Ocean region

Geographical perspectives matter. Unlike the United States and Japan, for whom the Indo-Pacific represents an extension of Pacific Ocean policies westwards, or Australia and Indonesia, who have both Indian and Pacific Ocean coasts, for India the Indian Ocean in its entirety represents the core of the Indo-Pacific region. The Western and South Pacific regions represent the periphery where India's role will always be modest, while the connecting waters – roughly from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Taiwan – represent an intermediate zone. But it is natural for India that the Indian Ocean take priority.

The Indian Ocean is vital for global trade, connecting major centers of the international economy in the North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. Approximately 90,000 commercial shipping vessels form the backbone of international goods trade, and energy trade is of particular importance: about 40% of the world's oil supply travels through strategic chokepoints into and out of the Indian Ocean. This ocean is also a valuable source of mineral and fishing resources.<sup>41</sup> The Indian Ocean's vast drainage basin is important in its own right. Its littoral is densely populated and comprises some of the fastest growing regions of the world. But it is also vulnerable to natural disasters. Two of the most devastating natural disasters in recent history – the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 – occurred in the Indian Ocean rim.

The Indian Ocean basin is of particular importance for India as the region's most populous country. For India, 95% of its trade by volume and 68% of its trade by value comes via the Indian Ocean.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, about 80% of India's oil and 45% of its liquefied natural gas is imported by sea via the Indian Ocean. Taking into account India's offshore oil production and petroleum exports, India's sea dependence for oil is about 93%, according to the Indian navy.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, India is heavily dependent on the resources of the Indian Ocean, including fishing resources and mineral resource extraction.

But the Indian Ocean – in contrast to the Pacific, Atlantic, and in a different way the Arctic – is under-governed and has many weak littoral states. Securing the free flows of trade and energy, sustaining the exploitation of natural resources, and managing humanitarian disasters are difficult enough without the risks to regional governance that include naval and resource competition among states as well as non-state actors such as pirates, smugglers, and terrorists. Beginning in 2005, pirates operating out of Somalia began to hijack commercial vessels, with such incidents peaking in 2010. A series of steps taken to counter piracy by governments and industry, including naval operations by several countries (such as India), resulted in a sharp drop in piracy in 2012.<sup>44</sup>



Non-state actors like pirates are not the only entities contesting the Indian Ocean. With an eye on securing trade routes, resource rights, and commercial interests, the naval forces of maritime states in the Indian Ocean region and beyond are becoming increasingly active. China's military modernization and active presence in the Indian Ocean is a particular driver of competition. As India's former chief of naval staff Admiral Sunil Lanba clearly articulated:

*Since 2008, there has been a permanent presence of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean region in the form of an anti-piracy escort force. The 31st anti-piracy escort force is presently in the Gulf of Aden. So at any given time there are 6 to 8 Chinese navy ships in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. Also, two years ago they commissioned their first overseas facility, or base, in Djibouti.*

*The stated aim of this deployment is to protect their trade, which is flowing through this area, from piracy. That included deployed submarines for anti-piracy operations, which is the most unlikely platform to be used for this role. There is no doubt they are spending a huge sum of money in developing their military capability. They are modernising their forces, they are modernising the command structure. And in my opinion, no navy has grown so rapidly in the last 200 years as the Chinese navy. They've added 80 new ships in the last five years. So the Chinese navy is a force, and it is a force which is here to stay.<sup>45</sup>*

India's concerns about China's military presence in the Indian Ocean have only increased with the development of potentially "dual-use" port infrastructure, which can be used for civilian and military purposes. The establishment of the Chinese military support base in Djibouti in 2016-2017 means the prospect of other Chinese naval bases dotting the Indian Ocean littoral, while not yet a reality, cannot be ruled out. Indian concerns have at various times extended to Gwadar in Pakistan, Bagamoyo in Tanzania, Mombasa in Kenya, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Feydhoo Finolhu in the Maldives. The rise in traditional security competition, especially when combined with a litany of non-traditional security threats as well as development needs, has compelled India to step up in the Indian Ocean region. This has taken a few forms.

First, maritime security requires better maritime domain awareness (MDA). To this end, India has established an Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in Gurgaon outside New Delhi, with the expectation of integration with the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore (where India has a presence) and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center in Madagascar. The induction of P-8i maritime reconnaissance aircraft by the Indian navy has vastly improved maritime domain awareness, including regular patrols of the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Mauritius and Seychelles, as well as the Strait of Malacca and Southeast Asian waters. A host of white shipping

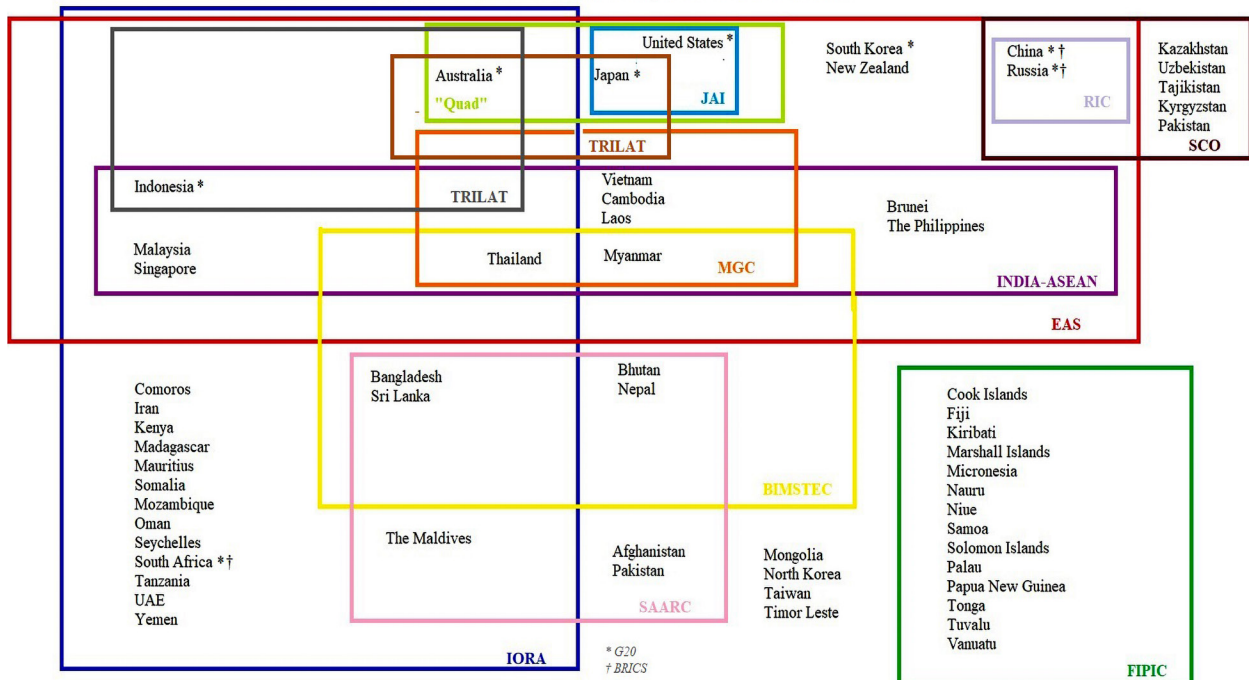
agreements have been signed with at least 38 countries for transparent information sharing about commercial and military shipping. Prior maritime awareness arrangements with Sri Lanka and the Maldives have continued, despite occasional political complications. The use and export of Indian coastal radar systems, including to Myanmar, and the leveraging of Indian satellite capabilities have also added to India's MDA capabilities.

Second, beyond MDA, India has attempted to extend the operational reach and presence of its navy. In 2017, the Indian navy began "mission-based deployments," a radical change from its earlier posture, which involved regular (e.g. annual) naval visits for military diplomacy, training, and assistance. Seven zones in the Indian Ocean have been identified for year-round patrols by a combination of aircraft, surface ships, and submarines. These include: the Gulf of Aden, the northern Arabian Sea, the waters around Lakshadweep and the Maldives, the EEZs of Seychelles and Mauritius, the northern Bay of Bengal, the waters around Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Straits of Malacca southwards. These occasionally involve coordinated patrols with regional navies. The new operations ensure that vessels are armed and prepared for a variety of contingencies. Additionally, India has entered into a host of agreements for replenishment and refuelling. These include logistics agreements with the United States, France, and Japan (under negotiation); a maritime agreement with Singapore (finalized in 2017); and arrangements to access facilities in Oman, as well as in Sabang in Indonesia. In just a few years, these have given the Indian navy access to a wide network across the Indian Ocean and beyond. Finally, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), search and rescue, and evacuation operations provide regular tests and demonstrations of capabilities, and India has conducted such operations following natural or manmade disasters in Yemen, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Fiji.

Third, India has stepped up attempts at improving maritime infrastructure and capability building efforts. This includes the Indian mainland and especially the critically-located Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India has developed a new base in the northern Andaman Islands, INS Kohassa, extended runways in the Nicobar Islands to enable P-8i landings, and improved submarine basing facilities. India has also negotiated agreements with Mauritius and the Seychelles for the development of two islands, Agalega and Assumption Island respectively, although negotiations have often been difficult and have faced local political opposition. India has developed commercial port facilities at Sittwe in Myanmar and Chabahar in Iran for multi-modal transportation and containers respectively, with attempts to link these to commercial corridors connected to the hinterland. Hard and soft capacity building offer additional tools. India has provided patrol vessels to Sri Lanka and Mauritius and aircraft to the Seychelles with other recipients of Indian military equipment in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa expected soon. Coastal radar systems are another example of Indian capacity building, as are officer training missions.

The fourth element of India's Indian Ocean approach has involved recasting regionalism. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) remains the most inclusive body for regional cooperation, in which India – along with Australia and Indonesia – has played a leadership role. IORA—which has traditionally emphasised maritime security, trade, cultural promotion, tourism, and fisheries but has recently diversified into resource management and governance – involves 21 states.<sup>46</sup> Increasing naval transparency and goodwill through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) represent an additional multilateral initiative. IONS, which has 35 members, seeks to “increase maritime co-operation among navies” of the Indian Ocean littoral states.<sup>47</sup> But questions will need to be answered concerning the adequacy of these institutions for addressing the region's many challenges. Such efforts are already being supplemented by bilateral and “minilateral” arrangements, as well as renewed momentum behind once-moribund groups like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

**India's Multilateral Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific**



## II. Integrating with Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia was the original basis for India's "Look East" policy. In addition to geographic proximity to India, it is important for its economic dynamism, remarkable diversity, and collective political weight. The rise and reassertion of multiple powers in the Indo-Pacific – China, most notably, but also India, the United States, Japan, Australia, and Russia – risk it becoming the primary realm of geopolitical competition in Asia for the foreseeable future. During a prior period of recessed great power influence (from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s), Southeast Asia successfully dampened security competition and increased cooperation through consensus: the so-called "ASEAN Way." Today, the basis of ASEAN unity and centrality is being tested; some would argue it has already been significantly compromised.<sup>48</sup>

India's engagement with Singapore, which remains a privileged partner in the region, has often been a driver of engagement with Southeast Asia as a whole. Not only has Singapore evolved into India's closest security partnership, it is also a gateway in terms of finance, business, and travel between India and much of Southeast Asia, and is also home to a sizeable Indian diaspora. At the same time, India's interactions with Southeast Asia have traditionally been hampered by Myanmar's isolation before 2015, as well as security concerns and displacement on both sides of the India-Myanmar border. Myanmar's recent economic and political opening therefore represents an opportunity to improve India's engagement with Southeast Asia as a whole.

Looking ahead, there are three elements to India's engagement with Southeast Asia. The first is simply political: showing up and giving diplomatic priority. It is often forgotten, but in the 1990s it was not a forgone conclusion that India would be considered a part of Southeast Asia's extended region; that it is today is no accident. Not only did India begin to engage formally with ASEAN after 1992, but it also became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), the Asian Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (2010) and the East Asia Summit (2005). These are in addition to efforts like BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) which are meant to bridge South and Southeast Asia. All of this means that today India is reasonably well integrated with Southeast Asia institutionally. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum remains an outlier, as India is not yet a member, and the prospects of India's entry are complicated by a membership moratorium and India's approach to trade. India may also struggle to integrate into a new generation of regional trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or variants that address a broader array of issues. But the new level of diplomatic priority accorded to the region is manifested in the creation of a separate Indian Ambassador to ASEAN in Jakarta, a Ministry of External Affairs division dedicated to Asian multilateralism, and the India-ASEAN Summit of 2018 hosted in New Delhi. India is likely to continue to approach the East Asia Summit as the region's apex summit.



A second element of India's relations with Southeast Asia – security – remains modest, but has made some important strides in recent years. In addition to Asian Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus participation, India has strengthened its security relations with Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, albeit often from a low base. Myanmar remains in a category of its own due to a shared boundary, where India and Myanmar participate in coordinated counter-terrorism activities. Singapore conducts mechanised forces, artillery, and air force exercises on Indian soil, and has entered into a maritime agreement. Vietnam and Indonesia held their first maritime exercises with India in recent years, and have benefited from training including, in Vietnam's case, for combat pilots and submarine sailors. Thailand and Malaysia conduct joint exercises with India and coordinated naval patrols. India-Thailand-Singapore exercises have opened the possibility of coordination with two or more ASEAN member states, and the Philippines has already been incorporated in plurilateral exercises, including a joint sail in the South China Sea involving navies from the Philippines, India, the United States, and Japan. The MILAN military exercises hosted by India represent an effort at building naval cooperation and confidence with regional partners, including – but not limited to – the maritime forces of Southeast Asia. India can still build upon all of these efforts to increase joint naval repair and maintenance facilities, and improve cooperative surveillance and intelligence.

Perhaps the least successful element of India's Southeast Asian engagement has involved improving India's eastward trade and connectivity. In terms of trade, India is the seventh-largest trade partner of ASEAN, if one counts the European Union as a single unit. But India's trade with ASEAN amounts to about one-seventh that of China's, and is therefore proportionally low.<sup>49</sup> India has also participated in negotiating a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), that includes ASEAN member states, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. This has presented India with a rather difficult dilemma: while the strategic logic of being included in such an arrangement is sound, the substance of facilitating goods trade may not benefit certain Indian sectors in the short-run, a challenge aggravated by concerns about China's inclusion and the further disparity in India's trade deficit. By contrast, India's priorities of services and labor mobility have faced resistance in RCEP negotiations, jeopardising Indian interest in the project and leading to suggestions by some negotiating countries that India be excluded from the arrangement. However, connectivity is about more than just trade in goods. It also involves the flow of people, capital, energy and information. India's comparative advantages in the digital sphere would require better data security and an enhanced role for the Indian private sector. India also can be taking better advantage of its goodwill and cultural links by increasing scholarships for students, boosting tourism for Southeast Asia, increasing cultural centres, and facilitating film distribution.

Physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia has traditionally been marred by poor Indian delivery and project management. Efforts have been made in recent years to try to rectify some of this. A few initiatives are of particular importance. The first is the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Friendship Highway, which will connect Northeast India to Thailand. While significantly delayed and complicated by local conditions, the highway is expected to be completed by approximately 2020. A second effort is the Kaladan Multi-Modal project, which connects Sittwe on the Bay of Bengal coast in Myanmar with the Indian state of Mizoram. This project has struggled with poor cost estimates and implementation by India's public sector units, but is also likely to be completed. A further element – and one seen as central to India's Act East Policy – involves improved physical infrastructure in Northeast India. While still constrained by resources, adverse human and physical geography, security concerns, and environmental and tribal protections, India has successfully sought foreign assistance – particularly from Japan and the Asian Development Bank – to improve highway and bridge infrastructure in Northeast India. Ongoing projects will link Bangladesh to Bhutan via Assam and Meghalaya; connect Dhaka to Shillong; and improve road access between Mizoram's capital Aizawl to Sittwe in Myanmar. Beyond such specific efforts, attempts at improving connectivity will require better customs and immigration arrangements, regulatory harmonization, and the lifting of capital controls.

To address the connectivity deficit with Southeast Asia, India did belatedly embark upon some small steps in the right direction, although these were complicated by outstanding issues with Bangladesh, and Myanmar's isolation before 2015-2016. In 2015, the land boundary agreement between Bangladesh and India was finalized. Myanmar started to become a significant recipient of aid from India and attempts were made to revisit and revitalise BIMSTEC. Indian trade delegations increased their visits to many parts of Southeast Asia and entities such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) began to open new offices across the region. Port infrastructure remains a bottleneck. There has been a more than a five-fold increase in container traffic in India since 2000 but Singapore still moves almost three times as many containers as all of India's ports combined.<sup>50</sup> Hence, new ports with greater capacity are of high priority for the Indian government, as are steps to facilitate connectivity with Bangladesh, ASEAN, and other partners to India's immediate east. This extends to customs, trade facilitation, motor vehicle agreements, and land, air, and maritime connectivity agreements. Many Southeast Asian countries have been advocating for an air connectivity agreement, but this has been opposed by domestic vested interests in India. The fact that only three countries in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia) enjoy significant air connectivity with India represents the degree to which – in the case of India and Southeast Asia – geography is not yet destiny.

On balance, it is clear that with Southeast Asia, much of the heavy lifting has largely been done with respect to political and institutional integration. On security partnerships, some headway has been made with Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. But the onus is, to some extent, on India's partners in Southeast Asia, who perhaps need to better communicate what kind of regional security role they seek and desire for India. On connectivity with Southeast Asia, accelerating infrastructure projects in India's northeast, improving the country's port infrastructure, and improving air connectivity with Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines still need to be higher priorities. However, all of these are subject to politics, sustainability and, most importantly, commercial viability. Overall, on trade, India may need to rethink some of its traditional defensiveness but better articulate its own objectives and goals when it comes to future commercial negotiations. In Southeast Asia – a diverse and dynamic region abutting India – New Delhi is already doing a lot more than just looking east, but much work will still need to be done before India can play a sufficient role in the regional balance of power.

### III. Partnering with balancing powers

Given the large and widening power disparity between China and India, New Delhi already has its hands full in attempting to dampen security competition in the Indian Ocean region and integrate into Southeast Asia. For this reason, partnerships with external balancers in the Indo-Pacific are absolutely necessary. However, relatively few states share similar concerns and worldviews as India and have sufficient military and economic capabilities to play necessary balancing functions. The most important and obvious is the United States. Another is Japan, which remains economically potent and has embarked upon significant defense reforms to enable it to play the role of a military balancer as well. Australia is already playing a more active regional role in the Indian Ocean and especially in the South Pacific. Other regional middle powers, such as South Korea and European entities – France, the United Kingdom, and the European Union – will remain pertinent. Additionally, India will have to carefully manage its longstanding defense relationship with Russia in the light of closer China-Russia relations and wariness in Moscow about India's diversified partnerships.

India has not sought alliances with any of these countries. Military alliances usually require a high level of interdependence, commitment, and seamlessness of operation, and are often (but not always) defense treaties that obligate one or both parties to come to each other's assistance. The United States, for example, has five treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific: Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines. While all are legacies of the Cold War, they each retain a particular function. Maintaining these alliances requires such elements as status of forces agreements (SOFAs) for basing troops overseas, a degree of interoperability of equipment and communications, and even some integration in command and control structures.

By contrast, a military partnership of the sought desired by India is distinct, even if it can serve a similar purpose. It does not generally entail a mutual defense treaty and comes with no obligations to act. But a meaningful security partnership can accomplish at least three things. One, it can help the participating countries share information, whether strategic assessments, domain awareness, or intelligence. Two, a defense partnership can help countries improve each other's capacity through training efforts, equipment sales, technological assistance, and access to facilities. Three, it can improve interoperability by familiarizing militaries with each other's practices, a common rationale for countries conducting military exercises. Moreover, harmonizing equipment, communication systems, and operating procedures – especially with respect to specific contingencies – can all help with interoperability.

Because a new treaty alliance requires assuming significant obligations and erodes decision-making autonomy, India has generally been much more comfortable in seeking defense partnerships and has done so simultaneously with many countries over the past quarter century. These include the United States, Russia, France, Israel, Japan, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and Singapore. Treaty alliances will be difficult, almost impossible, for a competitive democracy like India to enter into absent an existential or imminent threat. Additionally, few other countries actually want to enter into such an alliance with India, for it will require obligations and commitments on their part. While new treaty alliances are unlikely absent a sizeable and immediate shared challenge, there is a lot that India can do with its primary defense partners to achieve its regional security objectives.

The United States is already India's most important security partner in the Indo-Pacific. This partnership's potential was realized beginning in the early 1990s when initial military contacts began after the Cold War. After the 1998 nuclear tests, cooperation swiftly resumed. The administration of Bill Clinton lifted sanctions on India by October 1999, motivated by both commercial and strategic reasons, and for the first time the United States backed India in a crisis with Pakistan during the Kargil War of 1999. The George W. Bush administration was early to recognize India's potential as a balancer, with his adviser Condoleezza Rice (later National Security Adviser and Secretary of State) writing in 2000 that India could play a wider role in Asia.<sup>51</sup> In 2005, this was put into action with a senior official announcing that the United States' "goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century...We understand fully the implications, including military implications of that statement."<sup>52</sup> This meant an appreciation that, in the analyst Ashley Tellis's words, "a strong, democratic, (even if perpetually) independent India [is] in American national interest."<sup>53</sup> The India-U.S. partnership was manifested in the civil nuclear agreement announced in 2005, which attempted to lift various technology export controls and political restraints on India. That agreement, finalized in 2008, culminated in a waiver by the Nuclear Suppliers Group, marking an effective end to India's nuclear isolation.

While it began its tenure by exploring avenues of cooperation with China, the Barack Obama administration eventually came to share its predecessors' assessment about India. Obama, during his visit to India in 2010, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an address in Chennai, both exhorted India to "engage" and "act" east. In her 2011 essay that first expounded the concept of the pivot to Asia, Clinton stated clearly that "India's greater role on the world stage will enhance peace and security."<sup>54</sup> By the end of Obama's tenure, India and the United States agreed to a wide-ranging Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region – which provided a strategic underpinning to the relationship – and India was elevated to a Major Defense Partner to enable defense cooperation on India's terms.<sup>55</sup> The Trump administration reinforced these commitments in bilateral statements with India and in its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy unveiled over its first two years in office. Among the tangible benefits were loosened defense technological export controls.

How exactly have these developments in India-U.S. relations manifested themselves? The two countries now talk more at the official level on more issues than at any time in the past. The inauguration of a cabinet-level “2+2” dialogue in 2018 involving both countries’ foreign and defense ministers represents the highest-level of institutionalized strategic dialogue between the two countries. There has been greater convergence on the Indian Ocean, and the two began a dialogue on East Asia. Following the 26/11 terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, intelligence cooperation also increased. In terms of capacity building, the United States began to provide some key defense technologies and equipment. This included C-17 heavy lift aircraft, C-130J tactical transport aircraft particularly suited for high altitude situations, P-8i maritime surveillance aircraft for the Indian navy, M777 light mobile artillery, and heavy-lift and attack helicopters. Such equipment has allowed India to better secure high-altitude military facilities, monitor large swathes of the Indian Ocean, and improve its humanitarian assistance capabilities. The United States is now the second-largest arms supplier to India in value, after Russia.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of interoperability, the two countries now conduct regular military exercises involving the two countries’ armies, air forces, and navies, with a tri-service exercise being planned. The Malabar exercises involving the navies is most evolved, and now includes Japan. The two armies conduct the Yudh Abhyas and Vajra Prahar exercises, involving special operations forces. The air forces plan to conduct Cope India exercises every two years, with the Indian air force participating in the United States’ premier Red Flag exercises every five years. Interoperability has also improved with the conclusion of various bilateral defense agreements, such as a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). These are mutually beneficial: LEMOA was first implemented not by the U.S. military, but by the Indian navy when refuelling in the Western Pacific. Despite a progressively deeper partnership in all these areas, efforts at facilitating defense technology transfers have been stymied by poor incentives for investment, commercial considerations, and political and bureaucratic hindrances on the Indian side, as well as continuing questions about the U.S. bureaucracy’s approach to export controls and restrictions by U.S. Congress.

Japan represents another important emerging security partnership for India in the Indo-Pacific. The two countries began to normalize relations in 2000 after India’s nuclear tests. Both New Delhi and Tokyo harbored similar concerns about China’s rise and military assertiveness, particularly after 2009, and were equally worried about the future of the United States’ security commitment to the region. For Tokyo, India is important for securing sea lines of communications, upon which Japan’s commercial interests and energy security are dependent. Due to the absence of historical baggage associated with Japan’s role in World War II, India has been useful in helping to normalize Japan’s military power and the expansion of its security role outside its immediate region. In the early 2000s, the two countries embarked upon some tentative anti-piracy operations and coast guard exercises.



In 2001, they institutionalized a security dialogue. Operational cooperation increased after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when the two countries, the United States, and Australia, worked together in an ad hoc manner to provide humanitarian assistance.

Strategic relations took off in 2006 under the prime ministership of Shinzo Abe. This resulted in a quadrilateral dialogue and exercises, also involving Singapore, in 2007. In 2008, the two countries agreed to a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation and initiated staff talks between the maritime forces. In 2010, a 2+2 dialogue involving the foreign and defense ministries was established. Bilateral naval exercises were held, somewhat belatedly, in 2012. In late 2013, Japan offered the sale of amphibious aircraft to India. Relations gradually extended to staff college talks, port calls, and participation in fleet reviews. After 2014, under Abe and Modi, the two countries increased coordination on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and on North Korea, signed and brought into force a civilian nuclear agreement, and concluded agreements to facilitate the sharing of classified information and defense technologies. Further, Japan was permanently included in the Malabar naval exercises. Subsequently, joint army and air force exercises were held, joint research and development efforts in unmanned ground systems were agreed to, and negotiations began for a bilateral military logistics agreement. For Japan, India has emerged as its most important security partner in the Indo-Pacific after the United States, on par with Australia. For India, Japan has enabled a security partnership without the complications or political sensitivities associated with relations with the United States.<sup>57</sup>

That being said, India-Japan relations will continue to have obvious limitations. These include resource constraints in India and a still largely pacifist public in Japan. Relations have often required top-down involvement, rather than an organic partnership buttressed by business and personal connections. Private sector cooperation remains weak. There are also structural constraints that will have to be worked around, including India's presence outside U.S. alliance structures. This complicates some operational cooperation, including communications and information sharing. Beyond shared concerns about China, both countries need to show more sensitivity to each other's secondary security concerns: North Korea in Japan's case, and Pakistan in India's case. Nonetheless, despite these evident limitations and concerns, the broader trajectory of India-Japan strategic relations is evidently positive.

A third country that can contribute to the regional balance – after the United States and Japan – is Australia. India-Australia relations have often been marked by differences, including on Pakistan, the Indian Ocean, the costs Canberra is willing to bear in its ties with China, and India's nuclear status. Some of that has been put to rest, including through a lifting of Australia's uranium ban on India and cooperation in forums such as IORA. Concerns remain in New Delhi about Australia's economic dependence on China, which is its largest export destination and a major investor. Although the

Australian government sought to step back from cooperation with India and others in 2008, in a bid to assuage Beijing's concerns, subsequent governments have attempted to deepen security partnerships with like-minded maritime powers in the region, including India. Progress has mostly been bilateral or trilateral in nature. Australia and India participate in the AUSINDEX naval exercises, have added multilateral air force and bilateral army exercises, and have engaged in official trilateral dialogues involving Japan and Indonesia. The two countries have also established a 2+2 dialogue involving the foreign and defense secretaries and may soon conclude a bilateral military logistics agreement. India features prominently in Australia's Indo-Pacific concept and proponents of the Indo-Pacific in Australia have often been among the strongest supporters of closer strategic ties with India.

The coming together of India, the United States, Japan, and Australia – or the “quad” as they are sometimes referred to – has often been controversial.<sup>58</sup> The four countries did coordinate in an ad hoc manner during relief operations following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In 2007, they held a one-off Malabar naval exercise along with Singapore and a working-level dialogue before Australia withdrew in 2008. In 2017, the dialogue on the Indo-Pacific restarted and it continued through 2018 and 2019 when it was elevated to the ministerial level. But while the quad has, to date, been modest, the bilateral and trilateral cooperation among the four countries has deepened considerably. Today, it includes six 2+2 dialogues at the ministerial or senior bureaucratic level, three (India-U.S.-Japan, India-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-Australia) trilateral dialogues, and over fifteen regular military exercises involving ground, air, and maritime forces. Further logistics, communications, and status of forces agreements among these countries are under negotiation, and efforts at improving defense trade, transfer of technology, and joint research and development are underway. While political and resource constraints remain for all four countries, security partnerships meant to balance against China's rise are already being forged.<sup>59</sup>

The four “quad” countries are not the only ones who will play a role in shaping the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in the context of a rising China. Obviously, several Southeast Asian countries – notably Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam – will play a role, and these have become more enmeshed in bilateral and multilateral security mechanisms involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The fact that the Philippines joined the United States, Japan, and India in operations in the South China Sea in early 2019 is indicative of this potential.<sup>60</sup> The same holds for some Northeast Asian states such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Mongolia, as well as Pacific countries such as New Zealand. Additionally, several European states, notably France and to a lesser degree the United Kingdom, will also play a role as potent military actors in their own rights. France possesses territory and sizeable maritime assets in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and so assumes the role of a resident power. The emergence of India-France-Australia cooperation in maritime affairs is indicative of the possible security role it can play. Additionally, the United Kingdom is part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (along with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore), retains a small military presence in Southeast Asia, and has participated in naval operations in the South China Sea.

For India, an additional regional partner of particular importance is Russia, which remains its largest defense supplier and continues to provide vital spares and maintenance for existing platforms. Since the Crimea crisis of 2014, Russia's defense exports to India dropped significantly, both in absolute (almost 50%) and relative terms (from approximately 80% to 60% of India's total in two years) as a consequence of Western sanctions.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, New Delhi has assessed that balancing against China will be significantly more difficult with a closer Sino-Russian strategic partnership. This relationship has already translated into higher-quality defense sales to China, political alignments between Moscow and Beijing, and Russian military contacts with Pakistan. For these reasons – despite widening differences between India and Russia over arms sales and Afghanistan, power shifts in India's favor, and a substantively narrowing relationship – India has attempted to keep Russia engaged. While Russia may not work to actively balance against China in the maritime sphere, it does play an important role in the continental space, in equipping India's armed services, and in providing military equipment and technical assistance to Indian partner countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. India's continuing purchase of advanced military systems from Russia is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, despite the protests of governments in Europe and North America. The fact that Russia is able to provide India with certain equipment, such as nuclear-powered submarines and sophisticated anti-aircraft systems, provides an added rationale for continued defense commerce. But beyond defense trade and technology, India continues to see Russia as vital to the regional balance of power. New Delhi will therefore endeavor to maintain that partnership in the years ahead.

## IV. Managing differences with China

Efforts at securing the Indian Ocean region, connecting into Southeast Asia, and deepening partnerships with balancing powers in the Indo-Pacific have their own value and purpose. But they assume greater importance and urgency as part of an effort to manage China's rise. The phrase "managing China's rise" is often perceived to be a euphemism for containment, but it should not be. In this day and age, China cannot be contained and its rise cannot be reversed. Its international influence will undoubtedly increase. Managing China's rise is a way of mitigating security competition by encouraging greater transparency on the part of Beijing, equitable and sustainable commercial interactions with China, the peaceful management of territorial differences, and adherence to established international norms. For India, it is a way to manage the boundary dispute (even if it remains unresolved), balance trade and economic ties, dampen security competition that might result from the Belt and Road Initiative, and seek suitable Indian representation at international institutions.

Ultimately, India will have to get its bilateral relations with China right. First and foremost, this will require better military preparedness as China modernises and reforms its military forces. India took steps to this effect beginning in the mid-2000s, including raising mountain divisions in the army and transferring frontline air force fighter aircraft to the eastern sector. Building better logistical infrastructure such as forward positioned airfields and improved roads, enhanced intelligence (with support from satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles), and the acquisition of lightweight artillery and heavy-lift and high-altitude transport aircraft have all been part of this effort. The experiences of Nathu-la in 1967, Sumdorongchu in 1986-1987, Depsang in 2013, Chumar in 2014, and Doklam in 2017 – when the Indian military contested Chinese assertiveness – show that the careful application of military force, along with complementary diplomatic efforts, can successfully blunt Chinese military adventurism.

Beyond arming, India will also have to play economic hardball, while advocating for reciprocal market access. Although India remains protectionist in a variety of ways, China is also a difficult place to invest, let alone acquire controlling stakes in companies. While Chinese dumping hurts Indian manufacturers, Indian firms have difficulty servicing Chinese companies, even in areas where they have comparative advantages. India will have to counter unfair Chinese trade practices, while advocating for greater business opportunities.

A similar balancing act will have to be performed on regional security. While India cannot stop Chinese investment and lending across the Indo-Pacific region it can try to provide viable alternatives. Given that Indian resources by necessity will be focused on the near neighborhood, India will have little choice but to partner with other countries. Joint or coordinated projects between India and Japan

have been discussed in such places as Sri Lanka, while India and Russia have cooperated on energy projects in Bangladesh. India's gaining access to Chinese-built facilities – as in Bangladesh – is another way to dampen security competition. In other instances, as in Sri Lanka, India will have to get assurances from host governments that potential dual-use facilities will not be used for military purposes. Still, in many areas, not least Pakistan or parts of Central Asia, Indian leverage will be limited, and the prospect of greater strategic expansion by China will have to be countenanced.

While clearly acknowledging the growing differences and power disparity with China, India must continue to work with Beijing whenever possibilities present themselves. At times this will be purely tactical quid pro quos. One recent example of this was at the Financial Action Task Force, where China dropped its resistance to including Pakistan on a terrorism "grey list" in exchange for Indian support for a leadership position for China.<sup>62</sup> At other points, there will be convergence, such as on climate change or at times on matters of humanitarian intervention. India can continue working within China-led institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The challenges associated with China's rise will not dissipate on their own. The consequences of hoping for that eventuality for India's security and territoriality, its economic well-being, and its overall rise in the international system would be far too great. Working toward a healthy bilateral relationship with Beijing is necessary, but the odds of that will be better managed only if India can balance internally (both economically and militarily), preserve its regional position, and play a more meaningful role in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

## Conclusion and recommendations

While not explicitly articulated in any Indian government document, the evolution of the Act East Policy anticipated many of the implications of China's rise and assertiveness. India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept, with its emphasis on the maritime domain and wide geographical scope, was a natural consequence. Experts and (to a lesser degree) officials in India – along with those in Australia and Japan – were early proponents of the term, and advocated for its adoption by the United States. Many elements of India's Act East Policy have been in place for some time. While India's institutional integration with the broader region has made considerable strides, and defense ties have accelerated over the past few years, economic and commercial relations have generally lagged. Beyond progress along the lines detailed above, India would do well to prioritise a few areas to accelerate the implementation of its Act East Policy.

- **Prioritise naval capacity:** While the Indian navy has stepped up in a major way over the past few years with mission-based deployments, more exercises, and HADR operations, its capacity has not always kept pace. Maintenance times have been shortened, and the navy's wish list for capital acquisitions have followed set agendas. But if the navy is to be adequately equipped to address future challenges and meet its obligations, far greater budgetary allocations and the urgent acquisition of critical platforms are necessary, in line with anticipated scenarios.
- **Facilitate overseas project implementation:** While India has already embarked on various international connectivity projects – from Chabahar in Iran to Sittwe in Myanmar – with mixed results, the need for India to improve its delivery is crucial. This will require better planning of projects, offering attractive terms for lending, and working more seamlessly with the private sector.
- **Enhance regional trade:** India's share of regional trade is underwhelming relative to the size of its economy, its geographical advantages, and its competitive wages. Concluding mutually beneficial trade agreements and improving trade facilitation, particularly with Southeast Asia, should be a priority.
- **Increase defense exports:** India's ability to support smaller partners will be found wanting without sufficient defense industrial export capability. While India's exports of offshore patrol vessels and coastal radars are a positive development, this could extend to other areas as well. Improving the investment climate in India's defense sector and factoring in export potential for platforms during procurement are some of the steps that would improve India's position.



- **Improve air connectivity:** While air connectivity will improve organically given travel demands and enhanced infrastructure, a few countries remain greatly under-connected. In particular, India would benefit significantly from better direct air connectivity with Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This in turn will boost business ties, tourist traffic, and cultural exchanges.
- **Attract but screen investments:** It is natural that India will continue to seek foreign investments, including from China, which have increased in recent years. However, it will also have to address growing security priorities. This will only be possible through better screening mechanisms for foreign investment and financing, and India could look to other countries – such as Japan – that have made concerted efforts to balance economic imperatives with national security concerns. More transparent screening processes will help in facilitating investment.

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