



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2025; 7(3): 143-146
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 24-01-2025
Accepted: 27-02-2025

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Geopolitics of the indo-pacific region and its impact on India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i3b.474>

Abstract

The only constant in life is change believed to be said by Heraclitus gives us the entire clarity of the laws of nature. Change is as natural as our life and it remains in a state of flow. Every change brings opportunity. Grabbing and grappling with such opportunities depends on the player to convert it for its benefits and strengthen its side. Indo-Pacific is among the most vibrant subjects under discussion in the present scenario. Its present importance and formation of this terminology “Indo-Pacific” has a direct relationship with the changes in the last decade. According to the Oxford geopolitics means the political relations between countries and groups of countries in the world as influenced by their geography. This Indo-Pacific becomes strategically very important due to the influx of the same element, the water in a certain region from different sides. Major Powers including America, France and also Japan have a vital role to play. All countries have different perspectives and wants from Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: State, players, indo-pacific, geopolitics, major powers

Introduction

The growing role of China and its expansionist policy led all other nations to unite against China. However, this has to be answered sometime in future. Deteriorating ties between India and Sri Lanka and also with the Maldives led India to rethink its maritime security and environment. With the coming of the Narendra Modi government in the year 2014 the old cultural and historical ties with Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka also got new life. Every large initiative of New Delhi shifting its strategic environment has paid off. In doing this India managed to balance the emerging China and it also renewed its relationship with the West. New Delhi’s foreign policy not only leveraged partnership with smaller nations but it also started looking west and acting States its Indo-Pacific strategy. The newly built tensions gave a new life to old relationships in the sea.

Objectives

- This study aims to understand the implication of emerging geopolitical confrontation and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific; it further aims to understand the foreign policy and its implication of the Pacific on India.
- It also focuses on understanding the new prospects that are in front of Indian foreign policy.

Review of Literature

In the book “The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World”, *Foreign Minister S. Jayshankar* lays out the broad framework for India’s policymaking.

Chintamani Mahapatra writes in “**Rise of the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives, Dimensions and Challenges**” that the Indo-Pacific has entered into the geo-political discourse and the lexicon of international relations.

Axel Berkofsky and *Sergio Miracola* in their book “**Geopolitics by Other Means: The Indo-Pacific Reality**” have explained the structural changes from the Asia Pacific to the Pacific.

He said that the Asia Pacific has become the Indo-Pacific region as the US, Japan, Australia and India have decided to join forces and scale up their political economy and security cooperation.

In his book titled “Chinese Expansionism and India”, *B.M Sharma and L.P Chaudhry* suggested Government of India revise its foreign policy. He pointed out that India should take lessons from the UN’s inability to stop Israel a protégé of Western powers and should build up a strong force that must be ready to back unheeded repeated protests.

D.M Baruah in his research paper “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theatre of Opportunity” said that the rise of China across the Indian and Pacific oceans challenges the security umbrella established at the end of the Second World War.

The book “The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific” authored by *Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumely* explains the complexity and contradictions of the Indo-Pacific as a coherent Geoeconomic and security regional system.

Research Methodology

The Methodology in a broader sense includes the procedure adopted for the study of any area of the problem. In social science, the term applies to procedures adopted to carry out a given problem. The research methodology to be adopted in the study is exploratory and descriptive. It is a qualitative study that is explanatory and descriptive based on secondary data for which its tools used are analysis, reports, books, journals and newspaper articles.

1. Evolution of Indo-Pacific

The term *Indo-Pacific* is not something that has a long history and lots of historical events. It has been created by major power holders of the world for the sake of convenience and benefits. The Confluence of two oceans i.e. Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean can be summed up as Indo-Pacific. The Japanese have their claim on the term Indo-Pacific after all Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used the term Indo-Pacific more than a decade ago in the Indian Parliament on the Confluence of two oceans. The contemporary unpredictable Geo-Political structure did not exist before the 18th century when India and China started making civilization ethos impact in Asia and even transcending the Asian boundaries by together contributing more than half of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ^[1].

Some purist believes that the Indo-Pacific term has its origin in Karl Haushofer’s (German strategist of the 1930s) Eurasian Strategy concept ^[2]. His narrative was based on the centrality of humanity and culture of the Indian and Chinese civilizations and their engagement in the bigger Pacific region in future which he called Indo-pacific (Indo-Pacific Space) ^[3].

As Chintamani Mahapatra, former vice chancellor of JNU says the emergence of Indo-Pacific can be seen through three major developments: India’s rise as an economic powerhouse, Influential political actor and China’s expansionist foreign policy ^[4]. First the rising capability of India to endorse big projects of countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia and many South Asian nations proves that India is an economic powerhouse of the region. Secondly last decade 2010-2020 everyone globally accepted India’s political stand on China’s expansionist policy when he started bilateral talks with Taiwan and saw Taiwan as a separate state. In a counteraction to China’s String of Pearls

Strategy India has started working on the Necklace of Diamonds strategy.

1.1 India as Economic Powerhouse

PM Modi has initiated the major “Make in India” campaign at a large scale to bolster the lagging economy. New Delhi has also invited CLMV countries-Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to join the International Solar Alliance and the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (RSCI) and said that this initiative has been taken to promote connectivity and boost trade between India and CLMV. There is an urgent need for strong infrastructure between India and CLMV countries for better economic integration like an improved rail network which will promote tourism, especially in terms of Buddhist circuits. India-Myanmar and Thailand’s trilateral highway project will not only help in better connectivity but also serve as a lifeline for the Mekong and northeast regions of India ^[6]. India has invested more than \$3 billion in Bangladesh and many Indian private MNCs have signed agreements and MoUs with Dhaka in different sectors like R&D, Infrastructure, Railway etc. In Dec. 2019 virtual meeting between both countries was one of the biggest historical meetings as both leaders agreed to restore the cross-border rail link which was in operation until 1965. India has the potential to lead the whole of Indo-Pacific and can act as the “Guardian of the Region” ^[7].

1.2 India as an Influential Political Actor

India not only made exponential growth in the economy but showed its strength and power on political grounds as well. Since 2014 PM Narendra Modi visited different nations and having bilateral meetings has improved the warmth with other states. New Delhi has never compromised its strand of neutral thought hence maintaining the core nature of its foreign policy. The meeting between foreign secretaries of India and North Korea shows how both countries have maintained relations with each other. As we know South Korea has the United States as its Big Brother and North Korea is greatly aided and endorsed by China. This is a quagmire situation for any country to develop a favourable condition but in this scenario, India successfully managed to balance their relationship with the Korean Peninsula balancing the two different ideologies of capitalism and communism. India even here set a practical example of the concept of “Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas”.

1.3 China’s Expansionist Policy

When the Interim Government was formed in 1946 on the eve of Indian independence the then senior leader of the Congress party Jawaharlal Nehru referred to China in his foreign policy in these words: “China that mighty country with a mighty past, four neighbours has been a friend through the ages and that friendship will endure and grow. We earnestly hope that her present troubles will end soon and a united and democratic China will emerge playing a great part in the furtherance of world peace and progress”. Based on the fifth principle of Panchsheel (India’s foreign policy) peaceful coexistence, India wanted to solve all international disputes by dialogue across the table. On the other hand, China rejecting all beliefs of ethics, morality, ancient tradition and friendship embarked on forcing his views and demands on others ^[8].

China understood the fact that short-term war, border tension and killings of 10-20 soldiers would not provoke its

enemy for war and it repeatedly engaged India and many other border-sharing countries on borders to create a buffer zone so that at a later stage it could capture that buffer area and take control of the region. Many times, India had witnessed Galwan-like incidents which further led to the death of soldiers. China's biggest ally Pakistan has gifted 2000 square kilometer land of POK to China where many development projects have been initiated by China under the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR). India signed this agreement with China to fulfil its last principle of Panchsheel which is peaceful coexistence. But here India forgot that the propaganda of Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai and policy of appeasement doesn't last long under diplomacy. China's vision of territorial expansion was very clear from the ideas of Chou-en-lai^[9].

As the world was struggling to overcome from COVID-19 pandemic, China cleverly and swiftly increased its influence on the whole of Indo-Pacific region. The Belt and Road Initiative and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are instruments of China through which it tries to establish itself as a major regional power^[10]. Under the "String of Pearls Strategy" geopolitical hypothesis proposed by United States political researchers claims that China has invested a hefty sum in the Hambantota Port project in Sri Lanka under China Merchants Port Holding Company Limited (CM Port). The total assets of the port are \$1.14 billion and the CM Port has invested \$ 1.12 billion. The debt was too high for the Sri Lankan government which was unable to pay so they had an agreement with China to give access to the Port on a 99-year lease as Britain did this with Hong Kong, but ownership would be retained by Sri Lankan Port Authority.

2. India's Foreign Policy

Since independence, we have seen that India's foreign policy is idealistic and it is based on morality and values. India not only fought for its independence on the grounds of moral values but also permeated values in its foreign policy in the later years. This evolution of no aggression policy was because India's first war of independence in 1857 was ultimately an unsuccessful uprising against the rule of the British India Company. The period of 1947-1962 is marked by the setting up of a bipolar world led by the USA and the USSR. Meanwhile, India played a crucial role in the establishment of NAM in 1961 which embarked on the journey of third world unity. In the next phase, India started making choices on security and political challenges. In the year 1965 India and Pakistan agreed to withdraw all armed forces to pre-war position and to restore diplomatic relations. One of the most prominent shifts in foreign policy was Look East Policy in 1991 initiated by the PV Narasimha Rao government. The next two decades saw strategic partnerships with the USA, China and Russia. India also forged some important regional links through groupings such as BRICS. It also emerged as the security provider for small island countries India's foreign policy has never been about big diplomacy to bring power shift either by strengthening its nuclear power or military or by expanding its sphere of influence Its core nature is to remain in balance and solve the issues through reconciliation. It applies some values and methods in dealing with its large neighbours Pakistan and China and also other Indo-Pacific countries. India established a new division in 2019 for the Indo-Pacific in its Ministry of External Affairs to address the region's growing global discourse. Similarly, is the

formation of QUAD and IORA.

2.1 QUAD

The QUAD formation has the individual interests of the member states. QUAD consists of the United States, India, Japan and Australia. India's stand on QUAD is very clear from the beginning that this group has been formed for like-minded countries for the advancement of security and economic cooperation. Geopolitically India is a reliable partner in the Indian Ocean region and can take on the role of being the net security provider in the region. ASEAN which is considered the elephant of the region shows no sign of a united stand on many issues that the QUAD is speaking about the South China Sea and the Mekong^[13]. Without the cooperation of ASEAN it would be difficult for the QUAD to implement any policy effectively regarding Indo-Pacific. So, it's a need of the hour to put ASEAN as a focal point for the success of the Indo-Pacific agenda. Professor Swaran Singh has noted, that there has been a clear drift away from the ASEAN occupying the driving seat on the issue of regional security architecture. The former ambassador to India and China's vice foreign minister in his recent speech accused the United States of creating the QUAD "an anti-China frontline also known as the mini-NATO"^[14].

2.2 Maritime Security and Disputes

Maritime security is the response to the threats that prevail in the maritime domain. Threats in this region include maritime Interstate disputes, maritime terrorism, piracy trafficking of narcotics, illegal fishing, maritime environment and other disasters. The interesting fact is that every country be it Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia Taiwan and Vietnam all have their claim in this area. The right to access something from the immense resources of the Indo-Pacific is mainly growing due to the rising need to safeguard their interest in this ongoing geopolitical competition increasing tensions^[15].

The dispute is a common thing to happen but maritime dispute is a new challenge in the Indo-Pacific. The growing power of China and its expansionist policy is the major cause behind escalating tensions. Its claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea in a threatening manner ignited America to take steps. China's other initiative The Belt and Road which consists of a series of infrastructure projects was not accepted by India. However, negotiations and arbitrations have been the peaceful paths for handling the tensions. But here comes the role of international law which can be used to pressure China. America with Japan and Australia by considering its importance to India forming a group QUAD.

2.3 Prospects of Indo-Pacific and India

The scope of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region from security, ecology, trade, disaster, relief, development and so on there is a need to build a coalition of likeminded states to encourage and observance of the rule of international law, peaceful settlement of disputes, tackling climate change or order trade and industrial policies. But the scope of the policy needs to cover the entire Indo-Pacific not only just one part of it. One of the moot questions is whether QUAD will act as a real regional alliance or it will serve the interests of the few^[16].

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region is highly heterogeneous in terms of economic size and level of development, with significant differences in security establishments and resources. Maintaining the delicate balance between the interests of all stakeholders will be a key challenge. Thus, India needs to carefully design its Indo-Pacific policy while keeping its long-term strategic and economic interests in mind. The optimal way forward is for China to acknowledge that multipolarity has a better chance of building enduring structures for peace and prosperity in a post-pandemic world. The one country that seems to have gained the most out of the QUAD is India. Due to its vast market potential and also as a counter to China in the region, most Western powers are giving great importance to India. For India, the disruption caused by China's forays into the Indian Ocean and South Asia and aggressive actions on its border will remain its top priority. India is the only country in the QUAD to face both maritime and land boundary challenges from China.

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