

Autonomy and Cooperation: India's Engagement in The Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT: India's Indo-Pacific strategy has become a cornerstone of its foreign policy, reflecting a nuanced blend of geopolitical, economic, and security interests. The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical arena of global geopolitics, encompassing strategic waterways, vital trade routes, and complex power dynamics. India's regional strategy promotes stability, economic growth, and maritime security through strategic partnerships with key regional players. These partnerships serve as the foundation of India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, enabling it to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness, deepen economic ties, and enhance regional security cooperation. This research paper explores India's evolving partnerships with prominent regional actors in the broader Indo-Pacific construct, including the United States, Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and ASEAN. The paper argues that India's emphasis on partnerships is essential for advancing its regional and global ambitions, yet its strategic autonomy remains a defining feature of its approach. By examining India's evolving relations with key regional players, the paper sheds light on how partnerships function as a pillar of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. It concludes that while India's security-based partnerships have strengthened, its economic engagement in the region requires further enhancement to maintain its strategic position effectively. Through an in-depth analysis of India's evolving role in the region, this paper will highlight how partnerships remain central to India's long-term strategic vision in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring its continued relevance in the global order.

KEYWORDS: Indo-Pacific, India, France, Australia, Japan, Vietnam, ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central geopolitical and economic hub, shaping global power dynamics. Encompassing vast maritime territories spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Indo-Pacific is home to key global economies, vital sea lanes, and rich maritime resources. Given the region's increasing economic and security significance, major powers, including the United States, China, Japan, Australia, and India, have sought to enhance their presence and influence. India, as the largest democracy and a key Indo-Pacific power, has positioned itself as a crucial actor in the evolving regional architecture, with partnerships forming the backbone of its engagement strategy.

India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific is not a recent development; instead, it has its roots in the Look East Policy (LEP) of the early 1990s, which was later rebranded as the Act East Policy (AEP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. The policy strengthened India's economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asia. Over time, India's interests expanded to include security, maritime cooperation, and connectivity projects, aligning with broader Indo-Pacific objectives. The Indo-Pacific concept, which gained traction in the last decade, has provided India with an expanded framework for engagement beyond its traditional South Asian neighbourhood.

A significant driver of India's Indo-Pacific strategy has been the rise of China and its increasingly assertive regional policies. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as its aggressive maritime activities in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, have raised concerns for India and other regional actors. While India does not overtly frame its Indo-Pacific policy as countering China, its regional partnerships and engagements reflect an element of strategic balancing (Rajagopalan, 2020). India has engaged in what some scholars call "evasive balancing," which involves forming strategic alliances with countries such as the United States and regional players like Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members to counterbalance China's growing influence while simultaneously trying to reassure China that it is not explicitly engaging in containment (Rajagopalan, 2020).

At the heart of India's Indo-Pacific strategy lies its emphasis on partnerships rather than formal alliances. This approach aligns with India's long-standing foreign policy principle of strategic autonomy, which allows it to collaborate with multiple partners while avoiding permanent entanglements. One of the most critical partnerships in India's Indo-Pacific engagement is with the United States. Over the past decade, India and the US have drawn closer in defence, economic cooperation, and regional security initiatives,

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particularly in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (Zajączkowski, 2021). The US sees India as a key partner in maintaining regional stability and balancing China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Apart from the US, India has also deepened its strategic partnerships with Japan, Vietnam, and Australia. India's relations with Japan have evolved into an Indo-Pacific Strategic Partnership, with both countries playing a leading role in maritime security and infrastructure development in the region (John, 2024). Vietnam, an emerging economic power in Southeast Asia, has also sought to strengthen its strategic partnership with India, particularly in security cooperation, given shared concerns over China's maritime assertiveness (Naidu, 2021). Similarly, India's relationship with Australia has grown significantly in recent years, particularly in maritime cooperation and regional security initiatives (Bhutia, 2023).

India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific is also closely tied to its engagement with ASEAN, which it sees as a cornerstone of regional security and economic integration (Sudan, 2022). India's Act East Policy has focused on building closer economic and diplomatic ties with ASEAN nations, reflecting a shared vision for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. However, while security cooperation has been significant, India has struggled to deepen economic integration, as seen in its decision to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019 (Song, 2024). This reflects India's broader challenge: balancing its strategic partnerships without compromising its economic priorities or its strategic autonomy.

Partnerships remain a key pillar of India's regional strategy in the Indo-Pacific, serving as a tool for both economic and security cooperation. However, while India has made considerable progress in strengthening its strategic ties, certain limitations remain. These include its reluctance to enter into formal military alliances, economic constraints, and regional challenges posed by China's growing influence (Kumar, 2020). Given that India's regional aspirations are increasingly centred on its role as a net security provider, it must strike a careful balance between maintaining strategic autonomy and building effective coalitions.

The Indo-Pacific Concept and India's Strategic Vision

The Indo-Pacific region, stretching from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific, has emerged as a significant arena in contemporary global geopolitics. It encompasses some of the world's busiest trade routes, including the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, making it a critical economic hub. The region is home to key players such as the United States, China, India, Japan, and Australia, whose interactions shape its security and economic frameworks. The Indo-Pacific is crucial for global economic stability, hosting vital maritime trade routes, rich energy resources, and essential supply chains. The geopolitical landscape of the region has undergone a rapid transformation in recent years, largely due to the rise of China and its increasing strategic and economic assertiveness. As a result, regional actors have sought to develop cooperative mechanisms to maintain stability and secure their national interests.

India, the world's largest democracy and a rising economic and military power, plays a crucial role in the Indo-Pacific. Its geographical positioning at the heart of the Indian Ocean, combined with its growing economic and military capacities, makes it a vital stakeholder in regional security and economic affairs. Since the early 1990s, India has pursued a policy of regional engagement through its "Look East Policy," later rebranded as the Act East Policy (AEP), aiming to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asian nations and beyond (Sudan, 2022). The policy was reinforced with the announcement of the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, which sought to position India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific.

A significant driver of India's Indo-Pacific approach is the rise of China and its assertiveness in the region, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its expansionist activities in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. While India has not officially characterised its Indo-Pacific policy as a counterweight to China, its strategic engagements with other regional and global players indicate an element of soft balancing (Rajagopalan, 2020). India's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific hinges on partnerships that enhance its ability to manage China's regional ambitions while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Unlike the traditional military alliances pursued by some of its global counterparts, India has focused on a strategic partnership approach. This allows it to maintain flexibility while ensuring strong economic and security collaborations. India's Act East Policy has enabled it to build closer ties with ASEAN and East Asian nations, promoting greater economic connectivity, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement (Sudan, 2022).

Several bilateral and multilateral partnerships have formed the bedrock of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Among these, collaboration with the United States is paramount, evolving from a broad strategic understanding to significant defence and security cooperation (Zajączkowski, 2021). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has provided a platform for India to collaborate with the US, Japan, and Australia in addressing regional security challenges and maritime governance.

Another major strategic relationship is with Japan, with whom India has significantly strengthened defence and maritime cooperation. Over the last two decades, their relations have transformed into a regionally and globally oriented 'strategic partnership' (John, 2024). This partnership is based on shared concerns over China's rise and a mutual interest in securing the Indo-Pacific region. Similarly, India has cultivated strong ties with Vietnam, a nation that shares concerns over China's maritime assertiveness (Naidu, 2021). The India-Vietnam strategic partnership is mainly focused on defence and security cooperation, though economic engagement has lagged behind. India's engagement with ASEAN is another key element of its Indo-Pacific approach, providing a multilateral platform to enhance regional economic and security cooperation (Sudan, 2022).

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India's Key Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

India-US Partnership

The Indo-US strategic partnership is one of the most crucial pillars of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. The relationship between India and the United States has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War, transitioning from mutual suspicion to closer cooperation. Over the past two decades, the two nations have progressively built a comprehensive global strategic partnership based on mutual interests and shared democratic values. This collaboration has intensified, particularly since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

A major element of Indo-US cooperation is in the realm of maritime security. Since the early 2000s, both nations have engaged in multiple joint naval exercises, including the Malabar naval exercise, which has grown into a robust trilateral and later quadrilateral exercise with Japan and Australia (Mishra, 2017). The US has consistently promoted India as a crucial strategic partner in maintaining regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Notably, the QUAD (comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia) has evolved as a security grouping aiming to uphold a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific (Zajaczkowski, 2021). The United States has also facilitated India's defence modernisation, offering advanced technologies and bolstering India's naval capabilities, as seen in the increased participation in Malabar naval exercises (Mishra, 2017).

However, India's approach toward the US is characterised by a cautious balance. While it engages in growing security cooperation, India avoids formal alliances, aligning with its historical commitment to strategic autonomy (Zajaczkowski, 2021). This positioning allows India to maintain flexibility in its foreign policy while simultaneously leveraging its partnership with the US to counterbalance China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which includes the US, India, Japan, and Australia, has become a cornerstone of India-US collaboration in the Indo-Pacific (Abraham, 2020). While the grouping has primarily focused on maritime security and freedom of navigation, it has also expanded to include cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity, infrastructure development, and pandemic response. The revival and strengthening of QUAD underlines India's commitment to a multipolar Indo-Pacific, where no single power dominates the region.

The economic dimension of India-US relations in the Indo-Pacific is also significant. The United States has emerged as one of India's largest trade partners, with both nations engaging in robust trade relations and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Song, 2024). However, India's decision to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019 raised concerns about its long-term economic commitment to the region. Despite this, India and the US continue to explore bilateral and multilateral economic initiatives under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Song, 2024). Through IPEF, India aims to enhance regional trade connectivity while mitigating overdependence on China.

Beyond defence and trade, India and the United States have also engaged in technology cooperation, particularly in high-tech industries such as semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and 5G networks (Song, 2024). As part of its efforts to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on China, India has partnered with the US to enhance its role in global technology and digital infrastructure.

In conclusion, the Indo-US partnership has evolved into a key pillar of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Despite the absence of a formal alliance, the collaboration has strengthened in defence, trade, and technology. However, challenges remain, particularly concerning India's strategic autonomy and reluctance to align too closely with US interests against China. The continued evolution of the Indo-US strategic partnership will be crucial in determining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in the coming decades.

India-Japan Collaboration

India and Japan's Indo-Pacific cooperation extends beyond defence to economic connectivity and infrastructure projects, such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. Their Indo-Pacific Strategic Partnership has strengthened maritime security and regional stability (John, 2024).

The India-Japan partnership has evolved significantly over the past two decades, transforming from a limited bilateral relationship into a regionally and globally significant strategic collaboration. Both nations share common values such as democracy, the rule of law, and a commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. This partnership is essential in maintaining regional stability despite China's growing assertiveness. The India-Japan relationship dates back centuries, but modern bilateral relations began to strengthen in the early 2000s with the establishment of the Global Partnership in 2000 and the Strategic and Global Partnership in 2006. Since then, both countries have expanded cooperation in defence, trade, technology, and infrastructure development. Japan is one of India's largest foreign investors, contributing to key infrastructure projects such as the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor and the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail (Bullet Train) project. Economic collaboration is also evident in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a joint initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and economic development across Africa and Asia (John, 2024).

Defence ties between India and Japan have strengthened significantly, with regular bilateral and multilateral military exercises such as Malabar and JIMEX. Both countries signed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2020, facilitating mutual logistical support between their armed forces (John, 2024). Given China's aggressive maritime expansion, India and Japan have

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prioritised naval security cooperation, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea. The two nations are working to ensure freedom of navigation, counter-piracy, and enhance port infrastructure in the region.

Despite their strong partnership, India and Japan face challenges, including differing economic priorities and Japan's security limitations under its pacifist constitution. However, with the evolving regional security landscape, both countries are expected to deepen their strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region.

India-Vietnam Engagement

India and Vietnam share a long-standing relationship rooted in historical ties, cultural affinity, and strategic cooperation. The two nations have deepened their engagement in response to the evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. Vietnam is a key partner in India's Act East Policy, and both countries have expressed their commitment to enhancing defence, economic, and diplomatic ties. The strategic partnership between India and Vietnam was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, reflecting their shared vision for regional stability and prosperity (Naidu, 2021). Defence cooperation has been a crucial pillar of India-Vietnam relations. India has provided defence training, capacity building, and military equipment to Vietnam, including patrol boats and missile systems. The two countries conduct regular naval exercises and maritime security dialogues to enhance interoperability and cooperation in the South China Sea, where both nations have concerns over China's assertive actions. The signing of the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Partnership further underscores their commitment to deepening security collaboration. Economic engagement between India and Vietnam has also witnessed significant growth, with bilateral trade surpassing USD 12 billion. India has emerged as one of Vietnam's top trading partners in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, IT, and infrastructure development. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative has facilitated connectivity projects, fostering trade and investment. Additionally, India's investments in Vietnam's oil and gas sector, particularly in the South China Sea, reflect the strategic and economic importance of their partnership (Naidu, 2021). Diplomatic coordination between India and Vietnam has strengthened in multilateral forums such as ASEAN, the United Nations, and the Indo-Pacific frameworks. Both countries advocate for a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and peaceful resolution of disputes in the region. Vietnam has supported India's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, highlighting the convergence of their geopolitical interests. Cultural and people-to-people exchanges have further cemented the ties between the two nations. India has extended scholarships to Vietnamese students under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, while Buddhist heritage tourism initiatives have fostered greater connectivity between their populations. The shared historical ties, including Vietnam's admiration for Mahatma Gandhi and India's support for Vietnam during its struggle for independence, continue to shape the warmth in bilateral relations. Despite the strong partnership, challenges remain, particularly in navigating the complexities of regional security dynamics and economic dependencies. China's expanding influence and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific pose strategic challenges for both India and Vietnam. Additionally, enhancing economic engagement beyond traditional sectors and improving connectivity infrastructure are areas that require further investment and collaboration. Looking ahead, India and Vietnam are poised to deepen their engagement across multiple domains. Strengthening defence ties, enhancing economic connectivity, and expanding technological cooperation will be key areas of focus. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve, the India-Vietnam partnership will remain a crucial pillar in promoting regional stability, economic resilience, and strategic balance (Naidu, 2021).

India-Australia Relations

The India-Australia strategic partnership has gained significant momentum in recent years, driven by shared democratic values, economic interdependence, and concerns over regional security (Bhutia, 2023). This partnership encompasses multiple dimensions, including defence cooperation, economic ties, energy security, and multilateral engagement.

In the defence domain, India and Australia conduct regular joint military exercises, such as AUSINDEX and Malabar, to enhance maritime security and interoperability between their naval forces. These exercises are crucial in countering regional threats and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. The signing of the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) in 2020 has further strengthened defence ties by allowing reciprocal access to military bases for logistics and replenishment.

Economic collaboration is another key pillar of the partnership. Australia is a major supplier of critical minerals, including lithium and rare earth elements, which are essential for India's renewable energy ambitions and technological advancement. The Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA), signed in 2022, aims to boost bilateral trade by reducing tariffs and expanding market access. Additionally, cooperation in the education sector has flourished, with increasing student exchanges and joint research initiatives between Indian and Australian universities.

Energy security forms another critical aspect of India-Australia relations. Given Australia's vast reserves of coal and liquefied natural gas (LNG), India has sought long-term energy partnerships to ensure a stable and sustainable energy supply. Collaboration in renewable energy, particularly solar and hydrogen energy, has also been emphasised under the India-Australia Energy Dialogue.

Multilateral engagements play a crucial role in the strategic partnership. Both countries are active members of the Quad, reinforcing their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Their collaboration in regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) further consolidates their strategic alignment on regional stability and economic cooperation.

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Despite these advancements, challenges remain in fully realising the potential of the India-Australia partnership. Differences in trade policies, bureaucratic hurdles, and the evolving geopolitical landscape pose challenges that require sustained diplomatic efforts. Strengthening institutional frameworks and expanding cooperation in emerging sectors such as cybersecurity and space technology could further solidify this strategic relationship.

India-ASEAN Ties

ASEAN is central to India's Indo-Pacific vision. The ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership focuses on trade, connectivity, and security. India's 'Act East' policy aligns with ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook, promoting cooperation in digital trade, supply chain resilience, and maritime security (Sudan, 2022).

ASEAN remains a cornerstone of India's regional strategy, with strong economic ties and maritime security cooperation. India has expanded engagements through the India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership and participation in multilateral frameworks (Sudan, 2022). The India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement has significantly enhanced economic collaboration, boosting trade and investment. Additionally, India has promoted regional connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project to strengthen infrastructure links with ASEAN nations. These initiatives aim to facilitate smoother trade flows, enhance people-to-people ties, and improve regional stability.

Security cooperation between India and ASEAN has also deepened through joint maritime exercises and counter-terrorism initiatives. India participates in ASEAN-led multilateral forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), contributing to discussions on regional security challenges. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), proposed by India, emphasises collaborative efforts in maritime security, sustainable development, and disaster resilience, further solidifying India's strategic engagement with ASEAN.

Despite the progress, challenges persist in India-ASEAN relations. Trade imbalances, bureaucratic hurdles, and infrastructure bottlenecks slow down connectivity projects. Moreover, ASEAN's cautious approach toward regional security issues, particularly regarding China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, sometimes limits the depth of security cooperation with India. Addressing these challenges requires India to enhance investment in regional connectivity projects, strengthen economic diplomacy, and further institutionalise its security collaboration with ASEAN nations.

India-France Strategic Partnership

India and France share a long-standing strategic partnership that spans defence, maritime security, nuclear cooperation, space technology, and climate change initiatives. The collaboration has strengthened significantly in the Indo-Pacific as both countries emphasise a rules-based maritime order and counter China's growing influence in the region (Buraga & Fournol, 2022).

Defence cooperation remains a major pillar of India-France relations. France has been a key supplier of advanced military equipment to India, including the Rafale fighter jets and Scorpène-class submarines. Joint military exercises such as Varuna (naval), Garuda (air force), and Shakti (army) enhance interoperability and operational coordination between their armed forces. Additionally, France's support for India's membership in multilateral export control regimes, including the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), highlights their shared strategic objectives.

Maritime security is another critical aspect of the partnership, with both countries advocating for freedom of navigation and adherence to international maritime laws. The joint strategic vision for cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) underscores commitments to combating piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism. India and France also collaborate through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to strengthen regional security frameworks.

In the nuclear energy sector, France has played a vital role in India's civilian nuclear program. The bilateral agreement on nuclear cooperation facilitates the development of nuclear power plants in India, contributing to energy security and sustainable development. France's expertise in nuclear reactor technology has been instrumental in advancing India's domestic nuclear capabilities.

Climate change and environmental sustainability remain key areas of cooperation. France and India jointly spearheaded the International Solar Alliance (ISA), aiming to promote solar energy solutions worldwide. Both countries actively participate in global climate agreements, advocating for sustainable development policies.

Despite the strong partnership, challenges such as regulatory barriers in trade, differing strategic priorities in multilateral forums, and bureaucratic constraints require continuous diplomatic engagement. Expanding defence co-production, deepening trade ties, and enhancing coordination in emerging areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence will be essential for the future trajectory of India-France relations.

Challenges in India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

China's Expanding Influence:

China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, poses a major challenge to India's regional strategy. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded China's economic and strategic footprint, challenging India's influence in neighboring countries. The border conflicts between India and China, particularly in the Himalayas, further complicate India's efforts to build regional stability (Karsanova, 2024).

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China's increasing military presence in the Indian Ocean, through its naval base in Djibouti and port developments in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar, raises concerns for India's maritime security. These developments encircle India's strategic space, limiting its ability to project power in the region. Additionally, China's dominance in critical supply chains and digital infrastructure, including 5G networks and undersea cables, adds another layer of strategic vulnerability for India.

India's strategic response has included enhancing its naval capabilities, strengthening alliances with Quad nations, and deepening security cooperation with ASEAN. The expansion of the Malabar naval exercises and the development of strategic partnerships with regional players like Vietnam and Indonesia reflect India's efforts to counterbalance China's influence. However, the challenge remains in maintaining a balance between deterrence and engagement, as India must navigate complex economic interdependencies with China while securing its strategic interests.

Furthermore, China's economic clout in South Asia and Southeast Asia, backed by its massive infrastructure investments, continues to undermine India's regional influence. Countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have increasingly leaned towards China for economic support, reducing India's traditional strategic leverage. Addressing these geopolitical tensions requires a comprehensive approach involving economic statecraft, military modernisation, and sustained diplomatic engagement with regional allies.

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

India's limited naval capacity and economic constraints hinder its ability to project power effectively (Kumar, 2020). India's Indo-Pacific strategy faces significant challenges due to resource constraints, particularly in defence spending, infrastructure development, and technological capabilities. Limited financial resources restrict India's ability to expand its naval and air power presence in the region. While India has made efforts to modernise its defence forces, budgetary limitations have slowed the acquisition of advanced military assets such as aircraft carriers, submarines, and maritime surveillance systems (Kumar, 2020).

Another major constraint is India's limited investment in regional infrastructure projects. Unlike China's extensive funding through the Belt and Road Initiative, India's financial commitments to connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project remain inadequate due to fiscal constraints. This impacts India's ability to enhance trade and logistical integration with Southeast Asian nations (Sudan, 2022).

Technological limitations also pose a challenge, as India relies on imports for critical defence and maritime equipment. While India has emphasised Indigenous defence production through initiatives like "Make in India," progress has been slow in reducing dependence on foreign suppliers for high-tech weaponry and surveillance systems (Song, 2024).

Addressing these resource constraints requires a multifaceted approach, including increasing defence and infrastructure investments, fostering public-private partnerships, and enhancing technological self-sufficiency to strengthen India's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific.

BALANCING ACT

India must carefully navigate its partnerships without provoking unnecessary tensions with China while maintaining strategic autonomy (Bo, 2021). India's Indo-Pacific strategy requires a delicate balancing act between major global powers, regional partners, and its own strategic interests. India's traditional foreign policy stance of strategic autonomy has led it to engage in multilateral frameworks without fully aligning with any single power bloc (Bo, 2021). While India seeks stronger ties with the United States and its allies through the Quad, it also maintains a complex relationship with Russia, a historical defense partner, and China, its largest trading partner.

India's challenge lies in balancing economic interdependencies with strategic concerns. China remains a crucial trade partner, yet tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean pose security threats (Karsanova, 2024). Similarly, while India deepens its defense ties with the US and France, it avoids formal military alliances to preserve its autonomy in global affairs.

India also navigates competing regional dynamics by engaging in ASEAN-led frameworks, maintaining strategic partnerships with Japan and Australia, and investing in African and Pacific Island nations. This balancing act requires sustained diplomatic agility, economic investment, and military preparedness to ensure India's role as a stabilising force in the Indo-Pacific without becoming entangled in major power rivalries (Sudan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is built upon robust partnerships, strategic autonomy, and regional engagement. The country's approach to balancing major powers while fostering regional cooperation reflects its commitment to a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. The deepening ties with the United States, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, and France highlight India's expanding role as a key stakeholder in regional security and economic development.

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However, significant challenges remain, including geopolitical tensions with China, resource constraints, and the complexities of strategic balancing. India's ability to sustain and expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific will depend on its capacity to enhance military capabilities, strengthen economic engagement, and invest in infrastructure projects that bolster regional connectivity.

Moving forward, India must adopt a proactive approach to shaping regional security frameworks, leveraging multilateral institutions, and promoting sustainable development initiatives. Strengthening domestic industrial and technological capabilities, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and deepening ties with regional allies will be essential in countering emerging threats and securing India's strategic interests.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy will continue to evolve in response to shifting global dynamics. By maintaining diplomatic agility, fostering inclusive economic policies, and reinforcing its defence posture, India can solidify its position as a stabilising force in the Indo-Pacific. The future of India's regional strategy will be determined by its ability to navigate complex geopolitical realities while remaining committed to its vision of an inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific.

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