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India's Strategic Initiatives In The Indo-Pacific: Countering China's Expansionist Agenda

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Abstract

In the recent years, the Indo- Pacific region has surfaced as a critical geopolitical and profitable territory, drawing significant global attention due to many reasons such as- its strategic position, abundant natural resources, and thriving maritime trade routes. For India, the Indo- Pacific holds immense significance, not only as a geographic region but as a strategic location that directly impacts its profitable stability, indigenous influence, and public security. Over the decade, China's assertive programs and expansionist policy in the region have created challenges for indigenous stability and sovereignty, compelling India to change its strategic programs to guard its interests and contribute to a balanced indigenous order. China's expansionist strategies, facilitated by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and growing nonmilitary presence in the Indian Ocean, have touched off enterprises across the Indo- Pacific. Beijing's efforts to establish a strategic base through structure systems, port development, and "debt trap" have been viewed as a challenge to the sovereignty of smaller nations and it also destabilises the traditional balance of power in the region. These assertive actions by the Chinese government have directly impacted India's strategic terrain, particularly in areas like the Indian Ocean, where China is adding maritime presence threatens to undermine India's traditional sphere of influence. In response, India has established a multipronged approach, emphasizing strategic alliances such as QUAD, military modernization in its technological aspects, and profitable enterprise aimed at fighting China's intentions while promoting an inclusive and rules- grounded indigenous order.

Central to India's response is the Act East Policy, which seeks to consolidate ties with Southeast Asian nations and strengthen profitable and security cooperation. India has also laboriously engaged in indigenous fabrics similar as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forums like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes the United States, Japan, and Australia.

These alliances emphasize India's commitment to maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indo- Pacific, where the principles of sovereignty, transnational law, and peaceful disagreement resolution prevail. Likewise, India's strategic emphasis on developing its nonmilitary capabilities reflects its recognition of the Indo-Pacific as a maritime theatre. At the same time, India's approach is not solely hostile to China. Using the interconnectedness of global trade and the benefits of profitable cooperation, India has maintained a neutral policy, seeking to engage China through diplomatic channels while simultaneously strengthening its defence and strategic alliances. This binary- track policy aims to strike a balance between competition and approval. India's strategic programs in the Indo- Pacific reflect a calculated response to the evolving regional dynamics shaped by China's expansionist docket. As the region continues to evolve, India's part as a stabilizing force and its capability to navigate complex challenges will be pivotal in shaping the future of the Indo- Pacific. By balancing fierceness with inclusivity, India aspires to secure its public interests while promoting a collective vision of indigenous peace, stability, and substance.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific region, Border and Road Initiative (BRI), Act East Policy, ASEAN, QUAD.

Methodology

The research methodology utilised in this study is a qualitative research methodology, involving reviews of many research journals, official government statements and press releases, news articles, and expert opinions from secondary sources.

This methodology was to understand state's behaviour, their motivations, and interests in response China's rising influence.

Research Questions

1. How has India's strategic policy evolved to counterbalance China's expansionist policies in the Indo-Pacific region?
2. What role has India's maritime strategy, defence diplomacy, and multilateral partnerships played in countering China's growing influence in the region?
3. What are the key challenges that India faces in implementing their policies in the Indo-Pacific region, how will it enhance their strategic position in the region?

Research Objectives

1. The objective of the research is to analyse the transition of India's Look-East Policy to Act East Policy in the Indo-Pacific region and its effect on China's ongoing economic, military, and diplomatic expansion in the region.
2. To examine India's maritime security strategy, modernisation in its naval capabilities, and establishment of strategic alliances with other regional nations, including its role in the Quad security dialogue, as countermeasures against China's assertiveness.
3. To identify the challenges India faces in balancing its economic, security, and diplomatic priorities and find its solutions.

Literature Review

The Indo-Pacific region has become a centre of global geopolitical tensions, with China's expansionist policies prompting India to make changes in its strategic approach. This literature review explores various perspectives on India's response, emphasising on military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. There are three main schools of thought on the topic of geopolitical situation of Indo-Pacific, which are Realists, Liberals, and Constructivists. Realist scholars, argue that India's actions military modernization, defence alliances, and counterbalancing strategies align with its traditional balance-of-power ideology. Differing from this viewpoint, liberal scholars emphasise that India's reliance on multilateral organizations, such as ASEAN and the Quad, is mainly to foster stability and development in the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, constructivist scholars, highlight that India's strategic vision of a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific is rooted in its historical and ideological background.

China's expansionism in the region is well known. Analysts describe its military assertiveness, including the militarisation of islands in the South China Sea and increasing maritime activities in the Indian Ocean as unreasonable and a cause for concern. Beyond its military capabilities, China's economic influence through their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has created dependencies among other regional nations, leading to concerns about "debt-trap diplomacy". Additionally, China's diplomatic strategies, such as strengthening their relations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and ASEAN nations, have further challenged India's regional influence.

India's strategic response has consisted of a multifaceted approach. Militarily, the nation has expanded its naval capabilities, modernised its defence systems and established significant defence partnerships, including logistics agreements with the United States, Japan, Australia, and France. India's trade and economic strategies include withdrawing from the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) while promoting the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) alongside Japan and Australia. Diplomatically, India has strengthened its role in the Quad security dialogue forum and engaged in bilateral dialogues with ASEAN and European member nations to counterbalance China's growing presence.

Despite these efforts, India's Indo-Pacific strategy faces many challenges that affect the implementation of these strategies. Militarily, India falls behind China in modernising its naval capabilities and defence expenditure. Economically, China's infrastructure projects under its BRI project grows significantly faster in comparison to India's initiatives, such as the Chabahar Port development. Additionally, India faces

geopolitical dilemmas, such as maintaining relations with Russia while deepening security cooperation with the U.S. and Japan.

Therefore, the literature suggests that future research should focus on India's ability to sustain its Indo-Pacific strategy amid evolving global challenges. Ultimately, India's ability to navigate these complexities will determine its success in shaping a stable and secure Indo-Pacific.

Introduction to Indo-Pacific Region: Strategic Importance for India

The Indo-Pacific region is one of the most populous and economically active regions in the world which also includes four continents: Asia, Africa, Australia, and America. It consists of 60% of the world's population and 2/3rd of the global economic output, making this region a global economic centre. The region is also a great source and a profitable destination for Foreign direct Investment. Many of the world's critical and large supply chains are dependent on the Indo-Pacific region. There are vast reserves of marine resources in the Indian and Pacific Oceans combined, including offshore hydrocarbons, methane hydrates, seabed minerals and other rare and precious metals.

It is home to three of the world's largest economies which are- China, India, and Japan, as well as seven of the world's largest military forces. The Indo-Pacific region is a region of great significance as one-third of the global shipping passes through the South China Sea.

As the global geo-political and economic gravity has shifted to the Indo-Pacific region India is seen as a key player in maintaining regional stability, economic development, and maritime security of the region by the major powers such as Australia, Japan, and the United States. This is mainly due to China's assertive actions in the region which threatens supremacy of the Western alliance led by the United States and the "debt trap" policy of Chinese administration which has coerced the smaller nations in the region to align with China. The policies of China which aims to become a dominant force in the region has threatened the sovereignty of other nations in the Indo-Pacific region and destabilises the global world order thereby, overthrowing the United States as a global hegemon.

To counteract such policies many nations with interests in the Indo-Pacific region look towards India as a growing power to take central role in managing these challenges. Although the concept of Indo-Pacific existed before, it never received any substantial attention until it was supported by U.S President Donald Trump in 2017 as the region became a new theatre of strategic competition between major powers.

With the Indo-Pacific concept gaining traction, India aimed to strengthen its strategic ties with other nations in the region forming its own alliance to counteract China's expansionist policies. As a newly emerging power with significant power in its fold, India became known as a reliable ally to its neighbours known not only for its cultural diversity and soft power diplomacy but also in terms of security and growing economy. The positive image of India helped in establishing ties with other nations in the international arena.

As India envisions a multipolar world order, forming partnerships and relations with other nations will help in the region's prosperity, development and stability benefitting many, while also acting as a counterbalance to China's growing power.

China's Policies in the Indo-Pacific Region

Border Road Initiative:

China's policies in the Indo-Pacific region for the past decade have been a source of major concern for its neighbouring nations as well as the global powers since these policies have entirely reshaped regional dynamics. China's strategy has included the Border Road Initiative or BRI project and militarizing the South China Sea.

The Border Road Initiative (BRI) or as it was formerly known as One Belt, One Road initiative was a project spearheaded by the Chinese President Xi Jinping which includes creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, moving in westward direction, through the mountainous former Soviet republics, and heading southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia. The plan has two approaches: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road.

Till now 147 countries consisting of two-thirds of the world's population and 40 percent of global GDP have agreed to participate and contribute in the project or they have expressed an interest in doing so.

Cause of Debt Crisis in Many Nations:

While these projects promise economic development for many nations, they have also raised concerns about debt dependency on China and violation of sovereignty. For instance, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port was leased to a Chinese company for 99 years after Sri Lanka struggled to repay Chinese loans, exemplifying the potential for economic leverage to translate into strategic advantage. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine which affected the global markets, a rising number of low-income BRI countries have expressed their inability in repaying loans associated with the initiative, giving rise to debt crises in the most difficult times.

China's Military Expansion in the South China Sea:

China's military expansion in the South China Sea have generated a lot of controversy and criticism from many nations. China has constructed artificial islands and developed military infrastructure systems in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, including airstrips, radar systems, and installation of missile. This militarization aims to enhance China's power projection capabilities and challenges the territorial claims of other nations, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. The United States has been a long-standing critic of these claims from China, calling it unlawful and criticised their actions in the South China Sea such as using intimidation to undermine the sovereignty of Southeast Asian coastal states in the South China Sea and bullying them out of offshore resources, asserting unilateral dominion.

India's Evolution from Look East to Act East:

India's vision for the Southeast Asian region has undergone a significant change since 2014 as the "Look East Policy of India" which started from 1990's evolved to "Act East Policy". This policy came into being due to rapid changes in the Indo-Pacific region and for India to strengthen its engagement with Southeast Asian nations and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This policy's aim is to enhance economic, strategic, and cultural ties, with other nations, while positioning India as a key player in regional power dynamics.

Under this policy, India sought to strengthen its trade and investment links with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which is a significant player in the region. Bilateral trade between India and ASEAN countries has witnessed a significant increase, with trade growth reaching approximately \$100 billion by 2022. India has also prioritized connectivity projects with other nations, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which aims to facilitate smoother movement of goods as well as people. Additionally, India's involvement in regional economic initiatives, which includes the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), reinforced its commitment to regional economic integration.

The Act East Policy also emphasised defence diplomacy and aimed for security collaboration to address mutual challenges. To address these challenges, India has conducted joint military exercises, such as the SIMBEX naval exercises with Singapore and the CORPAT maritime patrols with Indonesia to enhance compatibility and maritime security. Furthermore, India's active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia emphasised its role in promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. This strategic relation between India and other countries aims to counteract China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue:

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or otherwise known as the QUAD, is an informal strategic forum formed by the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. It was established with the aim to promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, the QUAD addresses challenges which are mutual to other nations, which includes maritime security, counterterrorism, and disaster relief. India's participation in the QUAD reflects its strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region and its policy in regards to regional security dynamics.

The concept of the QUAD was first proposed in 2007 by the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, this concept was supported by former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, Prime Minister of Australia John Howard, Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh. This initiative was further given strength by joint military exercises, notably the Malabar Exercise, involving the navies of the member countries. However, due to diplomatic dilemmas and concerns over China's possible retaliation over the formation of such a forum which is against its interests. Therefore, QUAD remained inactive until it was revived in the year 2017 due to China's actions in the region.

India shares a very complex relationship with China, marked by diplomatic relations towards peace and cooperation and military standoffs side-by side. Incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 have heightened India's security concerns. Through the QUAD, India seeks to collaborate with many like-minded nations to ensure a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region which also aligns with its vision of a multipolar world order.

Due to India's strategic location and extensive coastline, maritime security is of paramount importance for India. The QUAD provides a platform for India to engage in joint naval exercises with its allies, share important intelligence, and develop relations with its allies' naval forces, thereby strengthening its maritime capabilities in the region.

India also advocates for a rule-based international order, respect for a nation's sovereignty, and strict adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The QUAD aligns with India's vision of a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

India's Maritime Strategy for Indo-Pacific:

India's maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific region has undergone significant change, particularly in response to China's expanding naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region and its assertive policies in the region. India recognises the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, and has thus undertaken comprehensive naval modernization efforts to safeguard its interests and maintain regional stability.

The Indo-Pacific region is extremely important for global trade, with key sea lanes facilitating a substantial portion of the world's maritime trade. India's has a coastline spanning 7,500-kilometer and its central location along these vital routes highlight the need of a strong maritime strategy. China's ambition, which is exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative and its increased naval activities in the Indian Ocean, has further given attention to India's need in enhancing its naval capabilities.

India's Naval Modernisation and Security Partnerships:

In accordance with its evolving maritime strategy, India has taken steps to expand and modernise its naval fleet. This includes, the installation of advanced platforms such as the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft and the Sea Guardian drones, this aims to enhance surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. The development of platforms in their own territory, including aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines, is also part of the strategy to project its power.

To strengthen its maritime capabilities, India has pursued strategic partnerships with key nations. A noteworthy example is the collaboration between Germany's ThyssenKrupp and India's Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd, which aims to build six advanced conventional submarines which are to be equipped with air-independent propulsion systems. This \$5 billion deal will enhance underwater endurance and combat effectiveness.

India's Maritime Policy reforms:

India recognises the strategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and has thus focused on enhancing military infrastructure in the region. The upgrades include improved port facilities, airstrips, and surveillance systems, which will enable better monitoring of critical sea lanes and rapid deployment capabilities of India's navy.

India has undertaken reforms to improve its compatibility among its armed forces, particularly in maritime operations. India's strategy to establish the Integrated Defence Staff and the appointing a Chief of Defence Staff aims to foster better coordination and synergy among the defence services of the nation, enhancing operational effectiveness in the maritime domain.

India's Economic Strategy for Indo-Pacific:

India's economic strategy in the Indo-Pacific region is a multifaceted approach towards enhancing trade, to strengthen regional partnerships, and asserting its influence in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape which has the potential to harm its interests. This strategy incorporates participation in regional economic frameworks such as with ASEAN, with the objective of bolstering domestic manufacturing, and engaging in strategic partnerships to ensure a sustainable growth and stability.

India's participation in Regional Economic Frameworks:

India's participation in regional economic initiatives is important to its Indo-Pacific strategy. The nation has shown interest in frameworks such as with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), with focus on trade, to establish a resilient economy, clean energy, and fair economies. The IPEF offers different aspects of cooperation, making it easier for nations to choose pillars that align with their national interests, thereby strengthening their economic ties within the region.

Although there was reluctance initially, there is a growing discussion within India about joining major trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The supporters of this idea argue that membership in these agreements could boost India's manufacturing and export sectors, which will benefit small and medium enterprises. This perspective highlights the importance of integration into global value chains to enhance competitiveness.

Enhancing Domestic Manufacturing and Reducing External Dependence:

A core aspect of India's economic strategy is the "Self-reliant India" campaign, this campaign aims to reduce dependency on external economies, most notably China. This initiative focuses on development of domestic capabilities in critical sectors such as electric vehicles, advanced batteries, and microchips and to establish India as a global supply chain hub. However, challenges remain, as India continues to depend on imports for essential components in industries such as solar energy and pharmaceuticals. Balancing the drive for self-reliance with the realities of global supply chains remains a complex aspiration for India.

Strengthening Strategic Partnerships and Infrastructure Development:

India's economic strategy also includes deepening strategic partnerships with like-minded countries with the aim to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific. This includes cooperation with nations such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, focusing on enhancing trade, investment, and infrastructure development. These partnerships aim to create a balanced regional order and counterbalance the influence of other major powers, with the most prominent being China.

Additionally, India is investing in infrastructure projects both in domestic and in neighbouring nations to enhance its connectivity and economic integration. For instance, India has extended financial support to the Maldives, which includes a \$100 million treasury bills rollover and a \$400 million currency swap agreement, this is to strengthen bilateral ties and promote regional stability.

Challenges and Obstacles in India's Indo-Pacific Strategy:

India shares a vision of free, open and an inclusive Indo-Pacific region with a rules-based order. However, this strategy faces many challenges in its implementation, such as geopolitical tensions, internal political obstacles, economic limitation etc. Many of the challenges are elaborated in the following:

Geopolitical and Diplomatic Challenges:

- **China's Growing Influence:** One of India's biggest concerns is China's expansionist policy and militarisation of the South China Sea, Indian Ocean Region, and the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- **China employs a "String of Pearls" strategy** which consists of forming maritime infrastructure networks in Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Djibouti in Africa, which creates an encirclement to undermine India's naval operations.
- **India's Ambiguous Stance in QUAD:** India, although an important member of Quad group, is still hesitant to take any strict stance on China. This is mainly to avoid any tensions or hostility from a nation which is in proximity with India.

Economic Constraints:

India's economic strategies reflect its influence in the Indo-Pacific region and its commitment for regional stability. However, this commitment faces challenges due to India's limited economic capabilities as compared to China's Trillion Dollars investment in the Border and Road Initiative (BRI) project.

India's withdrawal from Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a Free Trade Agreement with many Asia Pacific nations such as China, Australia, Japan etc. has become a concern as it could lead to slow economic growth.

Military and Technological Limitations:

India's military also faces its own set of issues such as accidents, delays, shortages in infrastructure and human resources in its navy's modernisation programme. India is also more focused in its land border with China,

especially after Galwan Valley clash in 2020 between Indian and Chinese troops. Thus, India's priority is mainly on the land border, making maritime a second priority in its security strategy with China.

Though India's Make in India initiative has improved domestic defence production, major weapons such as the Rafale Jets, S-400 missiles are still imported from other nations. India's lacklustre response towards non-traditional security threats such as cyberattacks due to technological limitations are also concerning.

Internal Political and Policy Challenges:

U.S imposition of Sanctions on Iran: The imposition of sanctions on Iran have caused uncertainty with its partnership with India in Chabahar port and has complicated the progress with the project.

Geopolitical Instability in Neighbouring Nations: Political instability among the neighbouring nations of Myanmar and Bangladesh have affected India's connectivity projects including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

Conclusion:

India's strategic policies in the Indo-Pacific region reflect a dynamic and multifaceted approach to navigate the evolving geopolitical and economic landscape of the region. As China's expansionist policies continue to restructure regional power dynamics, India has proactively adapted its foreign policy, defence strategy, and economic engagements to secure its national interests and promote a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. India's emphasis on domestic manufacturing, particularly under the "Self-reliant India" campaign, outlines its efforts to reduce their dependence on Chinese imports and bolster their indigenous production.

By actively engaging in multilateral frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) etc. India has demonstrated its commitment to collective economic growth and regional security. Its soft power diplomacy, emphasizing on people to-people interaction have bolstered the ties between the regional nations through cultural exchanges, educational cooperation, and technological exchanges.

As China's assertiveness continues to shape the Indo-Pacific's strategic environment, fostering multilateral cooperation, diversifying economic partnerships, and leveraging its strategic location, has become crucial for India to gradually solidify its role as a regional powerhouse in the Indo-Pacific.

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