

# A r t y k u ł y

## Countering China: India's Pacific Predicament

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The term 'Indo-Pacific', while mingling the Indian and the Pacific Ocean geopolitics in the 21st century, also attempts to integrate India with the Pacific region geopolitically. India has increasingly integrated economically with the Pacific world since the unveiling of her Look East Policy in 1994, rechristened as the Act East Policy in 2014. Growing hostility between the country and China compelled India to turn to the 'contain China' approach in the Pacific region, which is the cradle of Chinese naval prowess. However, India's deficient naval strength with its focus on the Indian Ocean and her land-oriented security priority amid Chinese and Pakistani threats are major handicaps to India's geo-strategic aspirations in the Pacific region vis-à-vis China's rise. Therefore, India, unable to pursue an offensive realist approach to contain China in the Pacific, has opted for a 'balance of threat' approach, forming alliances with the China-wary countries of the Pacific region, albeit only informally, in order to avoid Chinese retribution.

*Keywords:* Pacific, China, alliance, India, strategy.

### Countering China: India's Pacific Predicament

Commenting on India's prospects in Indo-Pacific geopolitics in 2017, the former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Arun Prakash said that "India's trade links, investment and diaspora today span an arc extending from Siberia to New Zealand" and asserted that "[a]ny attempt to dominate waters of Indo-Pacific would represent a grave threat to India's vital interests."<sup>1</sup> The statement highlights India's growing compulsion to safeguard her expanding footprints in the vast Indo-Pacific world in the 21st century amid the so-called 'Chinese threat'. India's Ministry of External Affairs established a new Division for the Indo-Pacific in April 2019 in order to help consolidate India's vision of the Indo-Pacific across the Government of India.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 17<sup>th</sup> February 2017, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, Indo-Pacific Division Briefs, [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo\\_Feb\\_07\\_2020.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf) (accessed on 01.10.2020).

Broadly understood as an interconnected space between the two great neighbouring ocean bodies, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ lacks unanimous definition with regard to its geographical expanse. It is noteworthy here that the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) secret report of 1967 had designated the region of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an ‘Afro-Asian area’.<sup>3</sup> The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategic Report of the U.S. Department of Defense reads that Indo-Pacific region spans “from the west coast of the United States to the western shores of India.”<sup>4</sup> Geographically, the Indo-Pacific region expands from the shore of Eastern Africa to the shore of the Americas – from Alaska to Chile. Interestingly, however, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ is geo-strategic rather than geographical in character, reflecting the emerging maritime geopolitics of the 21st century. Thus, the concept of the geographical expanse of the term must vary from country to country with regard to the states involved in these maritime geopolitics, depending on their areas of priority. In the case of India, by 2004 the Indo-Pacific geo-strategic landscape expanded from the Indian Ocean in the 1970s over the Straits of Malacca, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

India’s policy-makers consider her a vital part of these maritime geopolitics.<sup>5</sup> Lately, India has been attempting to become a naval player from the shores of Africa to the Pacific. This aspiration, however, raises some pertinent questions regarding the nature of such an aspirational role amidst the ‘rise of China’ in the context of India’s traditional neutral and defensive foreign and military policy. Viewed through the prism of the power transition theory of A.F.K. Organski, the growing prowess of China is challenging the hierarchical structure of the international system, one constructed after World War II, with the USA at its helm since the end of the Cold War. Although it is debatable whether China wants to replace or displace the USA, it is beyond doubt that China is dissatisfied with the international power structure and hence empowers herself to take over as the superpower. This approach of China is creating a security dilemma for India, given the decades-old hostility between the two, forcing her to take steps to increase her security. In this context, India’s naval preparedness comes to the fore, as China is opening a new seafront, sailing through the Pacific.

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<sup>3</sup> *CIA Response to questions related to Western Pacific and Indian Ocean Base Study*, 17 November 1967, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79B00972A000100180027-3.pdf> (accessed on 23.09.2020), 9.

<sup>4</sup> “Indo-Pacific Strategic Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region,” *Department of Defence*, 1 June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF> (accessed on 03.10.2020).

<sup>5</sup> The re-christening of decades-old *Look East Policy* as the *Act East Policy* by the Narendra Modi administration in 2014 was an attempt to make India’s Asia-Pacific policy more proactive. According to the Government of India, “The Objective of ‘Act East Policy’ is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region....” See: *Act East Policy*, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837> (accessed on 31.07.2020).

The anti-China strategic connotation of India's Indo-Pacific policy is well-known, which was further stimulated after the Galwan episode of June 2020, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) killed 20 Indian soldiers in a border clash in the disputed Ladakh area in the Himalayas. The incident has galvanised the Indian defence establishment, projecting the giant neighbour as an 'aggressor' who needs to be contained. Following the attack, India activated her naval deployments in the Indian Ocean as well as the South China Sea region. The Indian Navy also deployed its frontline vessels along the Malacca Straits near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, through which Chinese vessels enter the Indian Ocean region from the Pacific.<sup>6</sup> India seems to have an option to corner China in the Pacific area, where China's major challenges and a weak point is situated, namely Taiwan.

How far can India mingle with the rugged geopolitics of the Pacific region and what is the character of her current Pacific policy? These questions arise from India's conviction to counter the emerging 'Chinese challenge' in the Indo-Pacific region. The paper here attempts to analyse these questions considering India's options and their limitations in the Pacific. The author focuses on the following: India's Pacific policy predicament given her traditional land-oriented security policy in South Asia, her priority dilemma between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, as well as India's apathy and antipathy towards formal alliances, albeit overtly only against China.

### **China as the rising power vs. India as the *status quo* power**

In international relations theories, rising powers are sometimes considered as dangerous, since they attempt to expand the nature of power. According to classical realist Martin Wight, it culminates in territorial expansion, provided that there is no obstacle. As the theorist states, countries which are growing wealthier and more powerful will attempt to seek worldwide political influence (with control over territory, the behaviour of states, and the world economy) as well as expand their interests through a hegemonic war to revise or overthrow the established order.<sup>7</sup> Presupposing that China contemplates a 'hegemonic war' to change the current international order, her economic strength, her strongest military in the Indo-Pacific region, her assertiveness in the East China and South China Seas, and her much touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) all fit into Wight's definition of a 'dangerous rising power'.

On the other hand, the neighbouring states and external powers with interests in the region of the rising power will be more affected by the rise and will attempt to contain the rise through various measures, such as balancing, bandwagoning, engagement,

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<sup>6</sup> "Post-Galwan Clash, Indian Navy Quietly Deployed Warship in South China Sea," *Times of India*, 30 August 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/post-galwan-clash-indian-navy-quietly-deployed-warship-in-south-china-sea/articleshow/77834259.cms> (accessed on 25.09.2020).

<sup>7</sup> Randall L. Schweller, "Managing the Rise of Great Powers," in *Engaging China: The Management of Emerging Power*, eds. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (London–New York: Routledge, 1999), 2–3.

preventive war, appeasement, economic and political sanctions, accommodation, containment, etc.<sup>8</sup> India, as a *status quo* power and a country which is comparatively weak in the military regard, has traditionally pursued the balancing-and-engagement strategy in relation to China. One aspect of the balancing strategy is the strategy of containment, which seeks not to defeat the rising power, but prevent it from going for further expansion.<sup>9</sup> This ‘engage to contain’ strategy of India vis-à-vis China was best articulated in the conclusion of the *Panchsheel* [*Peaceful Coexistence*] treaty of 1954; it was tantamount to a non-aggression pact respecting each other’s territorial sovereignty and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs. Unfortunately, the treaty was flouted in the 1962 border conflict.

Nevertheless, the conclusion of the treaty reflected India’s expectation of China adopting a defensive realist approach. Defensive realism underlines that the powerful state ought to exercise restraint in pursuing foreign, military, and economic policies in the international system.<sup>10</sup> India insisted on this defensive realist approach with China, but to no avail, since Chinese actions reflect offensive realism, which, in turn, asserts that international anarchy (i.e. absence of an international government or a universal sovereign) incentivises the expansionist approach.<sup>11</sup> This attitude was reflected in President Xi Jinping’s 2018 assertion of China’s readiness to wage ‘a bloody battle’ to assume her due place in the world.<sup>12</sup> The aggressiveness was further depicted – in the combative defence mode – in the ‘wolf-warrior-style’ of Chinese diplomats’ undiplomatic, febrile, and scurrilous tirade countering allegations against China’s inadequate action in arresting the global spread of the COVID-19 virus, which originated from China. It is termed as part of a tougher approach, one meticulously built under the presidency of Xi Jinping; the *Global Times* asserted that days when China can be put in a submissive position are long gone.<sup>13</sup>

Such a cavalier and combative approach emanates not only from the national hubris, but also from the general character of a state, which relies on *national efficacy beliefs*, i.e. convictions about the ability of a state to accomplish specific military and diplomatic tasks regardless of the material power it possesses.<sup>14</sup> However, the fact that China is enhancing her material power – by improving transportation networks to mobilise higher numbers of units more expediently<sup>15</sup>, by hiking its defence budget by

<sup>8</sup> Schweller, “Managing the Rise of Great Powers,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> Schweller, “Managing the Rise of Great Powers,” 10.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliafero, “Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000/01): 128–161.

<sup>11</sup> Taliafero, “Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” 128.

<sup>12</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020, 11.

<sup>14</sup> The matter is defined and analysed in Andrew Bingham Kennedy’s *The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru: National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> *The Times of India* (Kolkata), 18<sup>th</sup> January 2019, 20.

7.5 percent<sup>16</sup>, or by initiating law enforcement activities in the disputed South China Sea under the guise of marine environmental protection<sup>17</sup> – underlines the rising of a power that is dissatisfied with the US' hegemonic set-up, especially China's Pacific backyard. China's prime naval focus is the Pacific region; it is her sole gateway to the wider maritime world and the major commercial route, with flash-points of territorial disputes.

### **Pacific Heartland**

The Indo-Pacific mission is a geopolitical game to thwart the expansion of China, both territorially and in terms of its influence. The current 'expansionist' model of China underlines the organic theory of state, in which the state, like the human body, tends to expand in size 'to grow.' And this growth is important to the state both for enhancing the character and quality of its citizens as well as for the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency, according to Swedish political scientist Rudolf J. Kjellen.<sup>18</sup> China wants to grow. This growth is important for her economic prosperity and because China considers her territorial map incomplete. The unification of the Pacific world from the East China Sea in the north to the South China Sea in the south under the Chinese flag is a geopolitical nightmare for China-wary powers. It resembles the Heartland theory of English geographer Halford J. Mackinder; the Heartland consists of the vast Eurasian landmass which, if united under a single political authority, could be a dominant entity.<sup>19</sup> Although continental in orientation, the Heartland theory is equally applicable to the Pacific zone vis-à-vis the 'rise of China.' China, a continental power, wants to possess her adjacent maritime zone in the Pacific. Mackinder, while asserting that no one would want a united Eurasian power, prescribed an independent tier of states between Germany and Russia to thwart the unification of Eastern Europe with Asia in order to maintain the balance of power and secure the British world power.<sup>20</sup> The USA is on a similar mission in the Pacific Heartland, uniting the small and the medium powers of the region to contain the Chinese expansion; it has now extended the mission to the Indian Ocean region under the Indo-Pacific banner, taking India on board. While Mackinder's Heartland theory deals with the unity of continental powers against a sea power, in the Pacific it is about a unity of sea powers against China as the continental power.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 6<sup>th</sup> March 2019, 9.

<sup>17</sup> "China discreetly launches initiative to combat 'illegal activities in key areas' of South China Sea," *ANI News*, 5 July 2020, [www.aninews.in](http://www.aninews.in) (accessed on 28.07.2020).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Charles Hagan, "Geopolitics," *Journal of Politics* 4, no. 4 (1942): 478–490.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Hagan, "Geopolitics," 480.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Hagan, "Geopolitics," 481.

## ‘Continental’ India’s Pacific reluctance

Before delving into the Pacific strategy of India, it is important to know how India is counted in as a factor in the Pacific geopolitics. C. Raja Mohan has argued in his well-acclaimed book *Samudra Manthan* that “India is widely seen as marginal to the security of Asia Pacific” and “understandably the least consequential for ordering of Asia Pacific security.”<sup>21</sup> However, the opinions of the Pacific leaders contradict such an estimation. Addressing the Indian Parliament in 2015, the then US President, Barack Obama, said that “[t]he United States welcomes a greater role for India in the Asia Pacific”<sup>22</sup>, while the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, insisted in 2007 on the “confluence of the two seas” – of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans – and said, “Our two countries have the ability – and the responsibility – to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparence (*sic*).”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the main Chinese daily, *Global Times*, which is considered a mouthpiece of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, commented that “India’s strategy is to expand its sphere of influence into the entire Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.”<sup>24</sup> India’s ratification of such an opinion was asserted by the former Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh way back in 2004 when he said, “Our strategic footprint covers the region bounded by the Horn of Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, South-East Asia and beyond, to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.”<sup>25</sup> In 2015, India and the USA agreed on a joint strategic vision to promote peace, prosperity, and stability in the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region.<sup>26</sup> All of this highlights the growing expectation as well as an aspiration for a proactive Indian involvement in the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean region, propelling the development of a naval strategic thought in the Indian policy-making circles.

India had been a continental power with a land-oriented security policy for a long time. The Indian defence policy, even under the British rule, had been continental and focused mainly on the Central Asian route to India, which was historically the route for

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<sup>21</sup> C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 89.

<sup>22</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of India,” *The White House Official Press Library*, 27 January 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/27/remarks-president-obama-address-people-india> (accessed on 23.07.2020).

<sup>23</sup> “Confluence of the Two Seas,” Speech by H.E Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Govt of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (accessed on 23.07.2020).

<sup>24</sup> Xu Guanyu, “Strategic intent Behind New Delhi’s plan to invite Australia to join Malabar drill,” *Global Times*, 07/11/2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1194205.shtml> (accessed on 23.07.2020).

<sup>25</sup> PM’s address at Combined Commanders’ Conference, 26 October 2004, New Delhi, <https://archive.pmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=32> (accessed on 24.07.2020), emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> “US–India Joint Strategic Vision,” 25 January 2015, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24728/USIndia\\_Joint\\_Strategic\\_Vision\\_for\\_the\\_AsiaPacific\\_and\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Region](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24728/USIndia_Joint_Strategic_Vision_for_the_AsiaPacific_and_Indian_Ocean_Region) (accessed on 24.07.2020).

invasion of the Indian subcontinent. The British, unassailable at sea with their naval dominance, but concerned about a Russian-and-Chinese invasion via mountain passes, developed a land-oriented defence strategy for India. After the transfer of power in 1947, sovereign India continued with this continental defence strategy, but with an eye on newly born arch-rival Pakistan and China after the latter's invasion of Tibet in 1950. The sea did not seriously feature in Indian defence deliberations for long. Moreover, four wars with Pakistan and one with China (and regular border skirmishes) across the mountains deepened India's conviction that land frontiers present a greater threat. India's maritime frontier did not matter much with the absence of any hostile maritime neighbour. This apathy towards naval strategy was the reason for India not paying much heed to the request of the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to involve India in Southeast Asian affairs in the 1960s in order to fill the power vacuum and contain the Chinese after the British withdrawal (the East of Suez policy). He considered India as the "only possible Asian power that had the potential to stabilize the region against China and the Communists."<sup>27</sup> However, Indira Gandhi refused. Such a role required naval strength, which India really lacked at that time. It is worth mentioning here that long before Lee, Indian historian-turned diplomat K.M. Panikkar had opined in 1945 that India in the post-war period would be an alternative to the USA as a security guarantor (of Southeast Asia); he was convinced that India could be a defence base in case of an attack on Southeast Asia.<sup>28</sup> Such an opinion was presumably rooted in the expectation about the British-like naval and political dominance that an undivided India would hold after the US' withdrawal from Southeast Asia at the end of the war. However, partition and a consequent alteration of the South Asian geopolitical situation ended India's naval potential for a long time to come.

As already mentioned, India's defence strategy had been land-oriented and also defensive in character and inherited by the post-colonial Indian administration. C. Raja Mohan highlights India's internal conflicts and prioritising security with regard to the new land borders.<sup>29</sup> Commenting on India's strategic culture, George Tanham asserted that, historically, "Indian forces were compelled to fight on the defensive, on Indian soil, after the invaders had already gained access to the rich north Indian plain... These military failures indicate that only infrequently did the Indians give much thought or attach much importance to the strategic defence of India."<sup>30</sup> Tanham was referring to the kingdoms in the north. However, the Chola Dynasty of South India as well as the Maratha Dynasty of Western India did maintain strong navies and there is a record of the Cholas' military expedition to the Malayan Peninsula in 1068AD, which

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in Sunanda K. Datta Ray, *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2009), 132.

<sup>28</sup> K.M. Panikkar, *The Future of India and Southeast Asia* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd / Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1945), 29.

<sup>29</sup> Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> George Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1992), 13.

highlights the offensive military strategy in pre-colonial India.<sup>31</sup> Still, it is undeniable that the Indian administration has maintained an overall defensive strategy with the *status-quo* power-orientation since 1947. In Tanham's opinion, the British were a *status-quo* power with a defensive strategy in general, particularly for India.<sup>32</sup> Besides, the British did not develop a formidable Indian navy, since the Indian maritime zone was patrolled by the Royal Navy until the British withdrawal in 1969. Thus, post-1947 sovereign India emerged without a strong navy and any strategic culture, since the Indians were never involved by the British in the grand strategic deliberations done in far-distant London. This way, post-1947 India developed a land-oriented defensive military strategy with a nonchalant approach under the Royal Navy's protection from any sea-borne threat. Such was the case until 1971, when the unhindered entry of the US aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* took place in the Bay of Bengal in support of Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistan war. Post-1971 India gradually developed a proactive Indian Ocean policy in the 1980s, which manifested in her operations in Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. Eventually, India established a prominent position in the northeast Indian Ocean region with a focus on choke points, including the Malacca Straits (gateway to the Pacific).<sup>33</sup>

The emerging notion of India as a 'rising power' is making India's naval strategy much more relevant today than during the Cold War era. This 'rising power' impression encompasses both the economic and military aspects of power. However, India has been considered more in terms of potential economic power, especially due to her multitude of human resources and vast market. Still, the complex geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, amid the 'rise of China', is driving an increasingly demanding enhancement of India's naval potential to counter Chinese actions. Is there a direct demand for India's offensive role to offset the Chinese browbeating in the Indo-Pacific region? If so, India will be placed on the fence, given her traditional defensive military policy. This defensive policy led India to promote international cooperation through international organisations such as the United Nations. Thus, India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru opined that the United Nations "should be encouraged and supported in every way, and should be allowed to develop into some kind of world government or world order."<sup>34</sup> This policy abides by the equilibrium-theory approach of international relations, developed by George Liska and Morton Kaplan; it claims that when the state feels that it cannot enhance its welfare, security, and prestige with unilateral actions, it attempts to promote these through international organisations.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), 68.

<sup>32</sup> Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Subhadeep Bhattacharya, *Looking East Since 1947: India's Southeast Asia Policy* (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2016), 91–92.

<sup>34</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961* (New Delhi: The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt of India, 1961), 33.

<sup>35</sup> Gyanender Singh, *International Politics* (New Delhi: Alfa Publications, 2008), 25.

India has always promoted international cooperation in order to thwart a war-like situation from developing, but only in the far-away regions, where her reach is limited. Thus, Indira Gandhi, during her visit to New Zealand in May 1968, argued against an outside force filling the vacuum left in Southeast Asia after the British withdrawal,<sup>36</sup> because that would keep the hostile ambience in the region alive. This suggestion was even more relevant in that India was cognisant of the negative impact of such a situation in the Pacific region on her neighbourhood as well as her inability – due to her naval incapacities – to do anything to contain such a situation from arising.

If today India delves into pursuing an aggressive strategy to contain China in the Pacific, she will have to decide on her role in relation to the potential flash-points of the region.

### Taiwan

Taiwan is the most sensitive issue in China's internal-cum-external affairs. China insists on the 'one-China policy' as a prime condition for diplomatic relations in order to dismember Taiwan from the world community. There has been a consistent demand in India's academic circles to revise this 'one-China policy' in India in the midst of the growing tension with the giant neighbour.<sup>37</sup> The emphasis is mainly on Tibet, but Taiwan is also significant, since the 'one-China policy' is more important to China, because Taiwan is an incomplete and the most humiliating chapter of the Chinese reunification mission. It is, therefore, a prestige issue for China. China has resolved to use force in case Taiwan declares independence. In India, on the other hand, emphasis is placed on developing relations with Taiwan in order to counter China, since Taiwan is part of the Indo-Pacific vision.<sup>38</sup> Taiwan (and Tibet) is considered an effective response to China's non-recognition of Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh as part of India. However, India has already vowed to adhere to the 'one-China policy' and backtracking from this stand is a very costly affair which will incur China's wrath that will be hard to handle.

India, nevertheless, has consistently maintained a separate and cautious policy towards Taiwan vis-à-vis Beijing. Thus, initially being hostile against the Republic of China (official name of Taiwan) after setting up diplomatic relations with the People's Republic in 1949, New Delhi secretly began to cooperate with Taipei in 1961 following a deterioration of relations with Beijing over border disputes; it even sought moral

<sup>36</sup> Reported by *Hindu*, 29 May 1968, cited in V.P. Dutt, *India's Foreign Policy* (Ghaziabad: Vani Educational Books, a division of Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1985), 254.

<sup>37</sup> "Rethink India's one-China Policy," *The Economic Times*, 3 July 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/rethink-indias-one-china-policy/articleshow/76762670.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 28.07.2020).

<sup>38</sup> Sana Hashmi, "It is time for India to invest in ties with Taiwan," *Hindustan Times*, 29 June 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/it-is-time-for-india-to-invest-in-ties-with-taiwan/story-HCNTqD-MTDEk4WazS3aqKmJ.html> (accessed on 28.07.2020).

support from Taipei during the 1962 tensions with China. Later, India developed intelligence cooperation with Taiwan.<sup>39</sup> Since then, India has maintained a separate Taiwan policy. The current Narendra Modi government, ignoring China's protests, welcomed a Taiwanese delegation of academics, businessmen, and legislators to India in February 2019 amid tension with China over Beijing's blocking the Indian initiative to ban Pakistani terrorist Masood Azhar by the UN Security Council.<sup>40</sup> Most recently, India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), allowed two of its legislators to attend the online swearing-in ceremony of Taiwan's new pro-independence President Tsai Ing-wen in May 2020; it was also attended by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, India's separate Taiwan policy is obscure in that it does not yield any result in relation to China's India policy when it comes to Kashmir or Arunachal Pradesh. On the contrary, India is reluctant to go beyond a limit to prod China on the Taiwan issue, since such acts in the far-away Pacific might provoke China's anti-India mission in South Asia to involve her neighbours. India suspects the Chinese are behind Nepal's recent claiming of the Indian territory bordering the Himalayan Republic.<sup>42</sup> China does not consider India a power that is worth reckoning with, and the country is aware of the challenges that India faces in her immediate neighbourhood. A worsening of the situation here is enough to frustrate India's grand strategies beyond the South Asian boundary. This wariness about Chinese scheming is holding back India from openly supporting the US' push for Taiwan's inclusion in the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>43</sup> – a move which China vehemently opposes. The Indian Foreign Ministry refused to comment even after participating in the US-led online meeting in May 2020 – apparently with the aim of strengthening the WHO – as to whether Taiwan was discussed in the meeting or whether India supports the US' moves to include it as a World Health Assembly participant.<sup>44</sup> India's dilemma in the Pacific lies with her inability to opt for a 'tit-for-tat' strategy vis-à-vis the Chinese antagonism against her, since India has little to gain and much to lose by playing the Taiwan card.

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<sup>39</sup> See Niclas D. Weimar, "India and the Republic of China (Taiwan): Diplomatic History and Contemporary Relations," *Journal of Asian Politics and History*, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 29–58.

<sup>40</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 16<sup>th</sup> February 2019, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times of India*, 26 May 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-mps-attend-taiwan-event-irk-china/articleshow/75986912.cms> (accessed on 28.07.2020).

<sup>42</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 16<sup>th</sup> May 2020, 1.

<sup>43</sup> "US Supports Taiwan's World Health Assembly Status," VOA, 30 March 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/us-supports-taiwans-world-health-assembly-observer-status> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>44</sup> "India caught in U.S.-China spat over Taiwan's status in WHO," *The Hindu*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-caught-in-us-china-spat-over-taiwans-status-at-who/article31569621.ece> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

## The South China Sea

Another emerging flashpoint in the Pacific geopolitics is the South China Sea maritime dispute. A vital commercial maritime route with billions of dollars of natural resources underneath,<sup>45</sup> the South China Sea is a potential flash-point, claimed in totality by China and disputed by Southeast Asian littoral states bordering the sea, supported by the USA.<sup>46</sup> The maritime zone is becoming a war zone fast, with China expanding her naval stronghold unhindered by the occupied atolls and reefs, and by the USA pushing in with carriers and ships to counter the Chinese assertiveness.<sup>47</sup> In fact, a call for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', the motto of the Indo-Pacific strategy, implies keeping the South China Sea free of Chinese sovereign dominance. However, the Chinese and American naval strategies underline a growing militarisation of the dispute.

India has increasingly been taking an interest in the South China Sea since the dawn of the new century. In 2000, India announced her plan to conduct joint naval exercises in the South China Sea; she sent warships, tankers, and submarines to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam for bilateral exercises.<sup>48</sup> India's interest in the maritime zone is both economic and strategic. The sea lane is vital to India's commercial links with East Asia, through which nearly \$200 billion worth of India's trade passes.<sup>49</sup> Strategically, the region is important to India for containing the Chinese expansion beyond the South China Sea and into the India Ocean region. The South China Sea offers to India similar strategic advantages that China enjoys in South Asia in respect of India. The disputing littoral states are India's strategic assets who are equally wary of Chinese expansionism. Vietnam has repeatedly granted permission to Indian oil companies to drill oil in the disputed sea, ignoring China's anger and objections. According to an official of India's state-owned oil company *ONGC-Videsh*, "Vietnam also wants us to be there because of China's interventions in the South China Sea."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The estimate of 28 billion barrels of oil with proven 7.7 billion and estimated 266 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. See: "South China Sea: Beijing has a major natural advantage in the geopolitical power game," *The Economic Times*, 17 June 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/south-china-sea-beijing-has-a-major-natural-advantage-in-the-geopolitical-power-game/articleshow/76423659.cms> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>46</sup> "US backs ASEAN on South China Sea, challenges China's predatory world view," *Hindustan Times*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-backs-asean-on-south-china-sea-challenges-china-s-predatory-world-view/story-QhWynYN2IGFvVofSh5aWBN.html> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>47</sup> "US sends two aircraft carriers to South China Sea during PLA drills," *The Times of India*, 5 July 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-sends-2-aircraft-carriers-to-south-china-sea-during-pla-drills/articleshow/76792447.cms> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>48</sup> Subhadeep Bhattacharya, *Understanding South China Sea Geopolitics* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2017), 219.

<sup>49</sup> "South China Sea: Beijing has a major natural advantage in the geopolitical power game," *The Economic Times*, 17 June 2020, <http://>

<sup>50</sup> "Vietnam renews Indian oil deal in tensed South China Sea," *Reuters*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam/vietnam-renews-india-oil-deal-in-tense-south-china-sea-idUSKBN-19R25P> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

Interestingly, the Philippine Defence Minister, commenting on India's willingness to carry on navigation in the disputed sea, said in July 2020 that "[w]e do not prevent other countries from passing through or doing things there in the South China Sea."<sup>51</sup> This statement is significant in the context of the tense relations between China and the Philippines over the growing Chinese activities in the South China Sea, implying Manila's objective to give space to the rivals of China in the Pacific to balance Beijing's threat. Again, India's access to Indonesia's Sabang port<sup>52</sup> and both countries' commitment to cooperate in the maritime domain in order to deepen the Andaman-Ache maritime connectivity<sup>53</sup> are both helpful to India's Pacific Ocean strategy for countering China. Indonesia's inclination towards India can be analysed in the context of the growing Sino-Indonesia tension over the Indonesian Natuna Islands falling within the China-claimed areas of South China Sea.<sup>54</sup> Yet, as in the case of Taiwan, India faces limitations in the South China Sea.

India's interest in the South China Sea is about ensuring freedom of navigation and not becoming involved in the dispute. In 2013, India's then Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid clearly said that India would not interfere in the territorial disputes between China and the Philippines, although he argued for a strategic partnership with the Southeast Asian country.<sup>55</sup> The 2017 joint statement released during the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India conspicuously dropped the direct mention of the South China Sea dispute, but referred to "achieving a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected, and differences are resolved through dialogue, and where all countries, large or small, enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight..."<sup>56</sup> All these actions show that India is reluctant, as in the case of Taiwan, to provoke China on the matter of the South China Sea, although the maritime zone is very important for India's economic and strategic

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<sup>51</sup> "India is interested in navigation in South China Sea region: Philippines," *The Economic Times*, 7 July 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-is-interested-in-navigation-in-the-s-china-sea-region-philippines/articleshow/76825668.cms> (accessed on 30.09.2020).

<sup>52</sup> "Indonesia gives India access to strategic port of Sabang," *Hindustan Times*, 17 May 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indonesia-gives-india-access-to-strategic-port-of-sabang/story-KPX-WKy7PGAHFUi0jCL26yJ.html> (accessed on 30.09.2020).

<sup>53</sup> "Official Visit of External Affairs Minister to Indonesia (September 04–06-2019)," Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, 5 September 2019, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31800/Official\\_Visit\\_of\\_External\\_Affairs\\_Minister\\_to\\_Indonesia\\_September\\_0406\\_2019](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31800/Official_Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_to_Indonesia_September_0406_2019) (accessed on 30.09.2020).

<sup>54</sup> "Indonesia issues protest to Beijing over Chinese vessels trespassing Natuna," *The Jakarta Post*, 31 December 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/31/indonesia-issues-protest-to-beijing-over-chinese-vessel-trespassing-in-natuna.html> (accessed on 30.09.2020).

<sup>55</sup> "We won't interfere in China's sea disputes, says Indian minister," *South China Morning Post*, 23 October 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1337624/we-wont-interfere-chinas-sea-disputes-says-indian-minister> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>56</sup> "India–Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India (September 14, 2017)," Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+visit+of+Prime+Minister+of+Japan+to+India+September+14+2017> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

security. Yet, according to Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who advocated for dialogue to resolve the dispute, India does not want the militarisation of the South China Sea.<sup>57</sup>

India has limited options to counter China single-handedly in the South China Sea also from the strategic point of view. In some parts of New Delhi, Vietnam is considered a counterweight in much the same way that Pakistan has been for China against India.<sup>58</sup> However, Vietnam is not Pakistan, which pursues a self-destructive policy towards its neighbour. China is a major trading partner of Vietnam, with trade of \$117 billion in 2019,<sup>59</sup> against \$13.69 billion of trade between India and Vietnam in 2018–2019.<sup>60</sup> Thus, doubts are already raised regarding such a conviction about Vietnam.<sup>61</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Vietnam did not criticise China after the Galwan clash and only advised the two countries to exercise restraint and not complicate the situation.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Vietnam does not want to spoil its relations with China for India, since Hanoi is aware of India's limitations in taking on China. India is even lukewarm regarding the requested sale of *BrahMos* anti-ship cruise missiles to Vietnam, fearing Chinese wrath.<sup>63</sup> India denied Vietnamese reports of selling the missiles to Vietnam in 2018.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, President Duterte's well-known pro-China policy, even with the assertive Chinese challenges in the South China Sea, leaves no hope for India, while Indonesia is currently looking for a Chinese vaccine to cope with its COVID-19 problem.<sup>65</sup> Besides, none of the countries will dare to challenge the might of their giant neighbour with their weak military powers, weakened further by the decreasing budget allocations due to poor economic conditions under

<sup>57</sup> “‘Don't militarise South China Sea’, says Rajnath,” *The Hindu*, 19 November 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dont-militarise-south-china-sea-says-rajnath/article30013892.ece> (accessed on 29.07.2020).

<sup>58</sup> Harsh V. Pant, “Why Vietnam is at the centre of India's policy to counter China,” *Observer Research Foundation*, 24 August 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/why-vietnam-centre-india-policy-counter-china/> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>59</sup> “Trade turnover \$117 billion with China,” *Customs News*, 16 January 2020, <https://customsnews.vn/trade-turnover-of-us-117-billion-with-china-13202.html> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>60</sup> “Economic and Commercial,” Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam, <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/economic-and-commercial/> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>61</sup> Manoj Joshi, “Vietnam Will Never Be for India What Pakistan is to China,” *The Wire*, 3 September 2016, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/vietnam-will-never-india-pakistan-china> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>62</sup> “India, China should exercise restraint, not complicate situation amid Covid: Vietnam envoy,” *The Print*, 22 June 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-china-should-exercise-restraint-not-complicate-situation-amid-covid-vietnam-envoy/446488/> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>63</sup> Rahul Bedi, “Four Years After Modi's ‘Act East Promise, India No Closer Selling BrahMos to Vietnam,” *The Wire*, 2 July 2020, <https://thewire.in/security/india-vietnam-brahmos-missile> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>64</sup> “Reports of BrahMos sale to Vietnam incorrect: Government,” *The Economic Times*, 11 July 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/report-of-brahmos-sale-to-vietnam-incorrect-government/articleshow/60123963.cms> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>65</sup> “Indonesia starts human trials of Chinese vaccine,” *Asia Times*, 11 August 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/08/indonesia-starts-human-trials-of-chinese-vaccine/> (accessed on 01.10.2020).

the pandemic.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, they might depend on China more to revive their pandemic-hit economies in the coming years.

### India's priority lies in the Indian Ocean

From the two cases discussed above, it is clear that India does not want to be too aggressive in the Pacific waters to counter and contain China. On the other hand, following the tension with China after the Galwan clash, India deployed a large number of frontline warships and submarines in the Indian Ocean to send a clear message to China, according to top defence sources of the country.<sup>67</sup> The policies in the two adjacent oceans, when juxtaposed, underline where India's naval prioritisation of security lies. India is the major power of the Indian Ocean region and it is her top maritime priority. The then Indian Navy Chief Admiral Nirmal Verma said in 2012 that it was the Indian Ocean and not the South China Sea that was the priority of the Indian Navy. As he stated, "...the Pacific and the South China Sea are of concern to us, but activation in those areas is not on the cards."<sup>68</sup>

India's active role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) can be traced back to the holding of the multilateral naval exercise *Milan* by the Indian Navy in 1995, with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium consisting of all the navy chiefs of the maritime region since 2008. The latest is the promulgation of *SAGAR* (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, outlined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, under which India would do *everything* to safeguard her mainland and islands as well as defend her interests (in the Indian Ocean region). Furthermore, India will also work to ensure a safe, secure, and stable IOR.<sup>69</sup> The promulgation of the doctrine itself is the proof of the active defence policy that India pursues in the IOR, unlike in the Pacific. This activity was further proved by India driving away Chinese vessels from the Andaman Sea of the IOR in December 2019.<sup>70</sup> India pursues a definite strategic relation with the Indian Ocean's island countries – such as the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka – to counter the Chinese influence.

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<sup>66</sup> Koya Jibiki and Tsukasa Hadano, "Southeast Asia's defense cuts create opening for China," *Nikkei Asia*, 20 June 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Southeast-Asia-s-defense-cuts-create-opening-for-China2> (accessed on 01.10.2020).

<sup>67</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020, 5.

<sup>68</sup> "Navy Chief says Indian Ocean is priority, not South China Sea," *Business Standard*, 8 August 2012, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/navy-chief-says-indian-ocean-is-priority-not-south-china-sea-112080802019\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/navy-chief-says-indian-ocean-is-priority-not-south-china-sea-112080802019_1.html) (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>69</sup> G. Padmaja, "Revisiting SAGAR: India's Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean region," *National Maritime Foundation*, <https://maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636602941847320911.pdf> (accessed on 30.07.2020), emphasis added.

<sup>70</sup> "Navy chases away Chinese ships from Indian waters in Andaman Sea," *The Indian Express*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/dec/03/navy-chases-away-chinese-ship-from-indian-waters-in-andaman-sea-2070847.html> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

The Indian Ocean Region is all the more important in the context of the alleged Chinese strategy to encircle India by developing ports and other facilities in the neighbouring South Asian countries, from Pakistan to Myanmar. Former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Arun Prakash termed this a “string of pearls” strategy for supporting long-range Chinese maritime operations. He even said that the deployment of PLA Navy submarines in the Indian Ocean in 2013–2014 indicated Chinese aspirations to gain maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean with the help of the logistic base of the Gwadar port (developed by China) in Pakistan.<sup>71</sup> It is worth mentioning here that in 2017 a Chinese deep-sea manned submersible collected a variety of precious metals – such as sulphide and basalt – in the north-western part of the Indian Ocean, while in 2016 another Chinese submersible conducted explorations in the southwest part of Indian Ocean.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the Indian Ocean commands more attention from the Indian establishment than the Pacific does. However, the overall naval potential of India faces serious challenges.

Indian defence requirements are divided over the priority issue, namely the land border with imminent threats from Pakistan and China versus the maritime border with no imminent threat. China is still a distant naval threat to India. Thus, there are opinions within the defence circle against a third aircraft carrier, since the immediate requirement is to have a strong Army duly supported by a capable Air Force to secure the land borders. Also, the naval focus is expected to be needed only in the Indian Ocean Region, which can be accomplished by a combination of smaller ships, submarines, good information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), and missile systems. Even India's first Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat has questioned the priority of the third aircraft carrier and said that naval aviation assets could be utilised on land borders when not utilised at sea.<sup>73</sup> It is pertinent to mention here that the Indian Navy is already complaining of a declining budget share, i.e. from 18% in 2012–2013 to 13% in 2019–2020.<sup>74</sup> Thus, with limited resources and priority dilemmas, Indian naval policy needs to prioritise the Indian Ocean over the Pacific.

### India's Pacific strategy

Although the Indian Ocean is the priority of India, the Pacific Ocean remains on India's radar due to her growing commercial links with the region. However, India,

<sup>71</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 16<sup>th</sup> February 2017, 5.

<sup>72</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Dinker Peri, “Third aircraft carrier not required as military focus is on land borders,” *The Hindu*, 24 May 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/third-aircraft-carrier-not-required-as-militarys-focus-is-on-land-borders-sources/article31665076.ece> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>74</sup> “Navy Chief Admiral Singh flags concern over decline in funds allocation to Navy,” *The Economic Times*, 3 December 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/navy-chief-admiral-singh-flags-concern-over-decline-in-funds-allocation-to-navy/articleshow/72350307.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

with her limited naval prowess and the priority dilemma as well as fear of costly Chinese anger, has little scope for pursuing an aggressive policy to contain China. Nevertheless, India wants China contained in order to safeguard her own interests. In this situation, where a state seeks security in an anarchic international system, Kenneth Waltz's 'balance of threat' theory, a variant of defensive realist approach, defines India's Pacific approach. Waltz's theory suggests that "in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves."<sup>75</sup> Since India is incapable of pursuing an offensive policy in the Pacific, she has to opt for an informal alliance of like-minded parties for joint efforts to contain China. India's alliance approach was well-articulated in Prime Minister Modi's *JAI* (Japan, America, and India) alliance proposal of 2018, as he underlined the 'democratic values' of the partner countries (against authoritarian China) for progressing a free, open, inclusive, and rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>76</sup> Although it is not a formal alliance, *JAI* (which means 'victory' in Hindi) highlights India's growing preference for more dedicated anti-China powers in the Pacific region. Japan and the USA are alliance partners who are major powers of the Pacific region and as such are determined to contain China, militarily if necessary. Another such naval alliance is the *Quad* – or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – platform, consisting of the USA, Japan, India, and Australia. According to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Quad will help Washington contain China's rise.<sup>77</sup> It highlights the assertive realist mode of the alliance. It is interesting to note here that India had once proposed cooperation between India, Japan, and Australia (but not the USA) to contain China; it was in 1967.<sup>78</sup> After the 1962 defeat, India 'cautioned' East Asia about the Chinese threat. India's Junior Minister for Foreign Affairs Lakshmi Menon famously said while visiting Thailand in 1963 that "[t]he Chinese problem is a common problem. One day it may be your problem in Southeast Asia...."<sup>79</sup>

### India's Pacific predicament

Having said all this, how dedicated is India to the US-led Pacific security order to thwart China's rise? Is India relinquishing her traditional non-alignment approach of foreign policy? Terming non-alignment as an old concept today, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar has affirmed that India will never be part of an alliance system.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Colin Elman, "Realism," in *International Relations Theory in the Twenty-first Century: An Introduction*, ed. Martin Griffiths (London–New York: Routledge, 2007), 17.

<sup>76</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 1<sup>st</sup> December 2018, 1.

<sup>77</sup> "U.S Security Bloc to Keep China in 'Proper Place', Pompeo Says," *Bloomberg*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-23/u-s-security-bloc-to-keep-china-in-proper-place-pompeo-says> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>78</sup> Bhattacharya, *Looking East Since 1947*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Bhattacharya, *Looking East Since 1947*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> "'India will never be part of an alliance system', says External Affairs Minister Jaishankar," *The Hindu*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-never-been-part-of-an-alliance-and-will-never-be-jaishankar/article32142128.ece> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

The minister even went further, terming the USA as a “big umbrella now smaller than it used to be” whose repositioning “has allowed many other countries to play more autonomous roles.”<sup>81</sup> This underlines India's preference for freedom in policy formulations, even in an alliance, as they are not to be dictated by a big brother. Debating on the US-led alliance system in Asia during the Cold War, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said in 1954 that “[a]fter all, it is the big and powerful countries that will decide matters and not the two or three weak and small Asian countries that may be allied to them.”<sup>82</sup> India continues with this traditional fixation on autonomy in foreign affairs decision-making as well as with a fear of a bigger power's dominance.

India cannot be considered a naval power that can be reckoned with in the Pacific region. Also, India's Pacific policy looks unclear in that the country invites Russia to the Indo-Pacific framework<sup>83</sup> in the context of the traditional anti-Russia powers' alliance participation in the US-led Quad and *JAI* in the Pacific. This is, however, an ‘Omni-enmeshment’ strategy of India to bring in all the rivals with a point of convergence (Russia also has issues with China<sup>84</sup>) to a single platform in order to balance the threat emanating from China in the Pacific. This strategy can be viewed as a defensive coalition approach underlining a balance of the power system. India's obligation to assure China that she is not promoting any anti-China coalition is also reflected in this approach with regard to inviting Moscow into the Indo-Pacific framework, which China views as a US' plot.<sup>85</sup> This ‘China factor’ has so far held India back from inviting Australia to the Malabar naval exercise with the USA and had even kept her hesitant about the Quad until recently.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusions

India's Pacific predicament lies in her strategic limitations in the region. India cannot afford to pursue an offensive realist approach in the Pacific against China, which will surely have repercussions in South Asia. Besides, she suffers from deficiencies

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<sup>81</sup> “‘India will never be part of an alliance system’, says External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” *The Hindu*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-never-been-part-of-an-alliance-and-will-never-be-jaishankar/article32142128.ece> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>82</sup> Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches*, 89.

<sup>83</sup> “Pacific a pivot for ties with Moscow: Indian Envoy,” *The Hindu*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/russia-should-be-more-involved-in-indo-pacific-indian-envoy/article32093190.ece> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>84</sup> “Chinese in Russian Far east: a geopolitical time bomb?,” *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2100228/chinese-russian-far-east-geopolitical-time-bomb> (accessed on 31.07.2020).

<sup>85</sup> Qian Feng, “Hegemonic nature of US Indo-Pacific Strategy exposed,” *Global Times*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191972.shtml> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

<sup>86</sup> Editors, “India is rather too cautious on the Quad,” *Hindustan Times*, 24 January 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/india-is-rather-too-cautious-on-the-quad/story-MiHOrI13tBm6fqHgGlePGI.html> (accessed on 30.07.2020).

in naval strength on the one hand and a priority dilemma on the other. However, her ‘contain China’ policy is obliging her to formulate a specific Pacific policy. India is pursuing the ‘balance of threat’ approach with her informal alliances in the Pacific to contain China. This unofficial approach is a result of both wariness about China and the traditional desire for autonomy in strategic affairs, apart from her compulsion for land-oriented security. This attitude is further endorsed by India’s insistence on the ASEAN’s centrality in the Asia-Pacific security architecture<sup>87</sup>, since none of the China-wary Southeast Asian countries is inclined to promote an overt anti-China alliance. This approach finds supporters among the traditional US allies such as Australia, whose Foreign Minister, Marise Pyne, has said that her country has no intention to injure its relations with China, but asserted that Australia will not do things contrary to its interests.<sup>88</sup> However, unlike India, Australia is becoming more vocal about the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. The Australian High Commissioner to New Delhi Barry O’Farrell expressed his country’s “deep concern” about Chinese actions in the disputed sea as destabilising and provocative, while Australia wrote to the UN Secretary General, refuting China’s unlawful claim over the maritime space.<sup>89</sup> India, however, as a *status-quo* power with similar concerns, refrains from nudging China on such a disputed issue and pursues the cautious ‘balance of threat’ approach in the Pacific region, with the objective of containing China’s suspected expansionist policy by forming an informal alliance with all the China-wary countries of the region.

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<sup>87</sup> *The Statesman*, (Kolkata), 7th August 2017, 1.

<sup>88</sup> “Pyne and Reynolds leave Washington with key ‘wins’ – and a room to disagree with US on China,” *Australia Times*, 30 July 2020, <https://www.australiantimes.co.uk/news/payne-and-reynolds-leave-washington-with-key-wins-and-room-to-disagree-with-us-on-china/> (accessed on 31.07.2020).

<sup>89</sup> *The Statesman* (Kolkata), 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020, 5.