

ESSAY

Examining the systemic realities of India in the US-backed Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

This paper examines India's role in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). The first section discusses China's rise and the threat perceptions that led the U.S. to adopt the IPS. The main objectives of the IPS are discussed, along with the growing partnership between the U.S. and India, studying the strategic shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. India-China rivalry in South Asia is then discussed, followed by US-India differences and India-China convergence. The systemic reality of India, as well as the consequences of its policy of strategic autonomy on the smaller South Asian states, is also examined. The paper thereafter concludes with the idea that even though India is unquestionably at the centre of any meaningful Indo-Pacific concept, it is not wise to assume that it will choose to intensify its security rivalry with China or become overly dependent on the United States. As the U.S. hopes to play a more meaningful role in establishing and maintaining an Indo-Pacific order, it remains to be determined as to how it will deal with Delhi. Further research into the developing Asian system and its systemic effects on small power behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region would be beneficial.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific Strategy, U.S.-India relations, India-China ties, strategic autonomy, systemic realities, South Asia

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Introduction

Multiple policies aimed at containing and influencing the Indo-Pacific region have been implemented because of geopolitical competition for global and regional primacy. When analyzing the evolution of different strategies aimed at defining the Indo-Pacific region and its importance in current security alignments, it is crucial to consider the threat perceptions that form the basis of bilateral and regional relations between India, China, and the U.S. In this context, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region (IPR), specifically India's role in the U.S.-backed Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). This is due to the fact that intraregional actors are likely to have a very different 'construct attachment' than regional states, which may have far-reaching effects on the strategy's applicability. Moreover, as a rising power with geoeconomic and geostrategic aspirations in the IOR, India is obviously central to any substantial Indo-Pacific concept, which has implications for developing regional architectures.

Since the conception of a region that encapsulated the security interests of powers beyond the imagined system, India has been at the centre of the re-imagining of the Indo-Pacific discourse, especially when pinning China as a genuine security challenge.¹ This is based on the idea that India is "the only nation with the force capability and political intent to prevent China from extending its "hard power" dominance ... of the Indian Ocean Region".² As such when alliances are discussed, there has been a general perception that the interests of the United States and India have been more aligned in current times due to their engagement across multiple sectors.³ This impression is supported by a cursory review of India's prescribed role in the IPS.⁴ It alludes to the notion that India under the U.S. endorsed IPS would ally with the former to contain China if needed. This alliance can, therefore, be viewed under the lens of the balance of threat theory, whereby China's mounting impact in and around the Indo-Pacific may create common threat perceptions for both states. However, within India's own systemic realities, the associations are much more complicated due to escalating insecurities and a desire to consolidate power on its terms.

This paper therefore aims to address two questions. Primarily, it seeks to ascertain the geopolitical competitions that led to the endorsement of IPS, and what

¹ J. Blank, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: India* (California: RAND Corporation, 2021).

² Blank, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: India*, 9.

³ D. Carmack *et al.*, *India-U.S. Relations: Priorities in the Next Decade* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation and The Heritage Foundation, June, 2022), 4.

⁴ "US and India are now more closely aligned in their relationship than ever in the past: Pentagon," *The Times of India*, last modified September 2, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/us-and-india-are-now-more-closely-aligned-in-their-relationship-than-ever-in-the-past-pentagon/articleshow/94383007.cms>.

significance India holds in the implementation of the strategy. More specifically, it further examines the degree and nature of India's response to China's growing influence and how it differs from the approach undertaken by the U.S. Through a simple analytical inquiry of secondary sources, the study assesses China's influence on the reconstruction and development of American policies toward the greater Indo-Pacific through the years, and how India has been envisioned within it. In order to achieve this objective, the paper examines the geopolitical competition using the balance of threat theory, which has also influenced the choice of literature reviewed. Considering the larger geopolitical context, this paper will assess the points of ideological divergence between New Delhi and Washington, in the face of Beijing's expanding regional interests. India's adherence to its Strategic Autonomy policy and its repercussions on the broader neighbourhood are crucial factors to examine to comprehend the evolving geopolitics in Asia.

Threat and alliances

The Asia-Pacific region has always been a priority for successive U.S. administrations, with varying degrees of American dominance. The U.S. led the post-Cold War East Asian order, giving Asian countries security, geopolitical predictability, and market access while gaining front-line strategic partners, including military bases and geopolitical presence.⁵ However, China's economic power now exceeds the U.S.'s, shifting the regional power balance. The Chinese economy is a formidable force, and Beijing has not been shy about using its economic influence to fortify regional and global ties. Due to China's booming economy,⁶ many Asian countries "are centred on China or view it as their primary export market".⁷

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa by land and sea is most significant. BRI financing appeals to developing countries with huge infrastructure gaps, but some worry that China-backed financing will burden developing countries with debt, giving Beijing economic clout and control over critical infrastructure, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁸ Speculators believe China's economic and military rise could end the American era and replace the "Western-oriented world order" with one dominated by the East.⁹ In this context, the Indo-Pacific region appears to have emerged as a new geopolitical

⁵ G.J. Ikenberry, "American Hegemony and East Asian Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58, no. 3 (2004): 353–367.

⁶ R.S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 355–395.

⁷ J.A. Bader, "China's Role in East Asia: Now and the Future," *Brookings Institute*, last modified September 6, 2005, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/chinas-role-in-east-asia-now-and-the-future/>.

⁸ C. Bouchard and W. Crumplin, "Neglected No Longer: The Indian Ocean at the Forefront of World Geopolitics and Global Geostrategy," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 6, no. 1 (2010): 26–51.

⁹ G.J. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23–37.

arena, primarily due to the economic growth of Asia and the increased interaction between Asian states. Given Asia's vast landmass, which is divided into five sub-regions: East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and post-Cold War, Central Asia, this forecast is merely a comeback of its glorious past. The region's landmass has been defined and redefined by nation-states from within and outside of it in terms of civilisation, regions, and geopolitical constructs. The region has recently been identified as a new, expanded theatre of power competition, with the Indian Ocean frequently viewed as a component of a larger Indo-Pacific strategic system.

The IOR has one-third of the world's population, the fastest-growing economies, and strategic sea lanes that carry 80% of maritime oil trade, 50% of container traffic, and 33% of cargo trade.¹⁰ Indian Ocean chokepoints like the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Lombok make regional dominance desirable. Beijing gets all its energy from the Indian Ocean Sea lines. Beijing's long-term presence in the IOR is confirmed by its military base in Djibouti, anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Arden, and funding of seaports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar. Washington and its allies fear China's IOR security ambitions may begin with a new base in Africa, with Pakistan and Sri Lanka signing similar security deals with Beijing. According to the String of Pearls theory, China would build civilian maritime infrastructure in friendly countries to increase its naval presence in the IOR.¹¹ China's rapid military build-up in the South China Sea supports the theory, and it shows China's ambiguous intentions and willingness to change the status quo unilaterally with force.

Similarly, the military might often follow economic power, and Asian countries already spend more on defence than European states. Although China's economic influence in the region is significant, the United States' military capabilities continue to hold the upper hand in Asia. Most Asia-Pacific nations buy US-made weapons, which binds their militaries and defence policies to the U.S. Many countries caught between Beijing and Washington must choose between China's prosperity and the U.S.'s safety.¹² China is also making progress here. China has been modernizing and improving its military capabilities for the past two decades. Since 2000, China's seven largest shipyards have built more submarines, destroyers, frigates, and corvettes than South Korea, Japan, and India combined.¹³

¹⁰ G. Suri, *China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)* (New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2017).

¹¹ G.S. Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and its Security Implications," *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 1 (2008): 1–39.

¹² M. Fisher and A. Carlsen, "How China is Challenging American Dominance in Asia," *The New York Times*, last modified March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/09/world/asia/china-us-asia-rivalry.html>.

¹³ D. Tweed and A. Leung, "China Is Making a Bold Military Power Play," *Bloomberg*, last modified March 6, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-china-navy-bases/#xj4yvzkg>.

China's unprecedented growth over the past few decades has altered the geopolitics of Asia and beyond. Speculators believe China's economic and military rise will bring the American era to an end, with the "Western-oriented world order being replaced by one dominated by the East". As China's power grows and America's power declines, two things are likely to happen: China will use its mounting influence to reshape the international system's rules and institutions to serve its interests, and other states in the system will see China as a growing security threat.¹⁴ Realists believe that great powers seek to become the system's hegemon by gaining power at the expense of other states. Thus, great powers fear and compete.¹⁵ As a result, China may try to dominate the region to become Asia's most powerful nation and ensure that no other country can threaten it. It will seek regional hegemony and impose acceptable behaviour on neighbouring countries by increasing its power gap. An increasingly powerful China may try to push the U.S. out of Asia and refuse American military presence in its neighbourhood.

As a result, countries affected by the power transition, such as the United States and other major players in Asia and beyond, must calculate the threat from China's rise and respond accordingly. China's rise worries the U.S., which has long dominated international affairs and the Asia-Pacific region. China's rise to the world's second-largest economy shows how the government prospered under an authoritarian free-market regime. The US, the messiah of democracy, finds the Chinese political system problematic, but the declining hegemon is more concerned about losing its global and Asia-Pacific influence. Washington will fight to contain China and prevent it from dominating Asia to maintain its regional position. Similarly, China's neighbours are bound to be alarmed by its rise and will do everything in their power to prevent the Chinese from attaining regional dominance.¹⁶ As a result, Washington and key Asia-Pacific partners like India—an aspiring Asian hegemon with a territorial dispute with China—perceive growing Chinese influence as an indication of offensive intentions. The U.S. and its allies, including India, are being persuaded to form a balancing coalition to contain China's aggressive foreign policy.¹⁷ The most significant developments have been the strengthening of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia's Quadrilateral alliance (Quad) and the Trump administration's clearly articulated Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China.

The ongoing coalitions could be understood through the lens of balance of threat theory. The formation of alliances is motivated by the existence of threats. A

¹⁴ Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive."

¹⁵ J.J. Mearsheimer, "Structural realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83.

¹⁶ J.J. Mearsheimer, "China's unpeaceful rise," in *The Realism Reader*, eds. C. Elman and M.A. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2014), 464–467.

¹⁷ D. Scott, "The Indo-Pacific in US strategy: Responding to Power Shifts," *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2018): 19–43.

state evaluates the threat posed by its adversaries based on four criteria: aggregate power, which indicates that the more resources a state possesses (population, industry, military, technology, etc.), the greater its ability to threaten others; geographic proximity to the target, as nearby states are more dangerous due to diminishing power projection with distance; offensive capability, as states with large offensive capabilities are more likely to provoke an alliance than militarily weak or defensive states; and offensive intentions, which are essentially perceived aggressive intentions.¹⁸ According to the Balance of Threat theory, states tend to form alliances against their most dangerous adversaries or threats, as opposed to power. As a result, the new Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) endorsed by Washington falls under the purview of the balance of threat theory. The IPS does take advantage of regional actors' perceptions of the threat that China poses. Due to the perception that China has offensive intentions and its proximity to the region, India, Japan, and other regional actors are more concerned with Chinese power than American power. Nonetheless, they all have their calculations for the upcoming power transition.

Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

With the demise of the Soviet Union, India was liberated from the Cold War's structural constraints, and as it pursued economic growth, global integration, and great power status, Washington and Delhi have found ways to deepen their engagement. Although India remains far from becoming a true global power, it is a significant player in Asia and the IOR. India is the only country in Asia capable of becoming an economic powerhouse to challenge Beijing, and it intends to do so. Since the Sino-India War in 1962, India has demonstrated a clear concern regarding Chinese intents. The ambiguity of China's intentions has always kept Delhi and Washington close, particularly on the security front. Relations between the United States and India began to improve under Bill Clinton and were accelerated by his two immediate successors. George W. Bush once told India's then-Prime Minister, A. B. Vajpayee, that "times were changing and a strong India can help provide the balance of power in the entire Asian region".¹⁹ Bush even started the U.S.-India nuclear deal, which was concluded in 2008.

U.S.-India relations flourished as part of Obama's pivot to Asia and as a potential counterweight to China. Even the "Indo-Pacific" discourse began circulating in the American establishment in 2009–2010, with the Obama administration realizing the inadequacy of the "Asia-Pacific" in light of India's and the IOR's growing importance in containing China.²⁰ The shift in strategic language was due to

¹⁸ S.M. Walt, "Alliance formation and the balance of world power," in *The Realism Reader*, eds. C. Elman and M.A. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2014), 145–149.

¹⁹ M. Malik, "Balancing Act: The China-India-US Triangle," *World Affairs* 179, no. 1 (2016): 46–57.

²⁰ H.R. Clinton, "America's Engagement in the Asia-Pacific," *US Department of State*, last modified October 28, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150141.htm>.

geoeconomic and geopolitical factors. The Obama administration focused on a “rebalance” strategy that highlighted the roles of its allies, which had been more receptive to its interests. It established that Washington wanted a “constructive relationship” with China.²¹ The language used to describe the rebalance strategy envisioned a relationship with China based on liberal and “rules-based” ideals, which were subsequently challenged. India, on the other hand, was mostly democratic and seen as a partner in securing a liberal order, but this partnership was not clearly defined. It also helped that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who came to power after a long run by the Indian National Congress, initially “adopted a strategic tilt towards the U.S.,” and that “the U.S. has expressed its resolve to elevate India’s strategic profile in the Asia Pacific and the IOR, besides putting its weight behind the Indo-Pacific regional construct”.²²

Obama’s appearance at India’s Republic Day Parade in 2015 was marked by a speech highlighting India’s status as a democratic nation and regional ally, indicating a “global partnership”.²³ What was generally understood as the pivot can be summed up from a few vantage points: the U.S. had stock in a “stable and vibrant” Asia with the rebalance,²⁴ but further deliberations were built on geopolitical calculations with a rising China that was not favourable to liberal aspirations in the region. As a result, the pivot served as a strategic counterbalance to Beijing’s power play in the region.²⁵ With Modi in power and Obama in his second term, US-India relations flourished as the U.S. encouraged India to take on more regional responsibilities. Obama’s foreign policy focused on India’s role in achieving two American national interests: strong bilateral security and defence cooperation, and a U.S. market. The Obama administration knew its presence in the region depended on its ability to maintain regional order and protect Asian allies.

In 2015, the two countries signed a 10-year Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) agreement, followed by the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, a NATO agreement. India rejected the U.S.’ proposed Communications and Information Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA)

²¹ The White House, “FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” last modified November 16, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>.

²² S. Hanif and M. Khan, “US Security Strategy for Asia Pacific and India’s Role,” *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring, 2018): 5.

²³ K. Zezima, “Obama lays out sweeping vision for US-India relations, emphasizes human rights,” last modified January 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-lays-out-sweeping-vision-for-us-india-relations-emphasizes-human-rights/2015/01/27/c8f930bc-a5f6-11e4-a7c2-03d37af98440_story.html; “Why Obama’s India visit charts new course,” BBC, last modified January 27, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30996317>.

²⁴ J. Davidson, “The U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia’,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (June, 2014): 82.

²⁵ P. Birgbauer, “The US Pivot to Asia Was Dead on Arrival,” *The Diplomat*, last modified March 31, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-us-pivot-to-asia-was-dead-on-arrival/>.

and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) to strengthen military cooperation.²⁶ They were later signed in 2018 and 2020, respectively.²⁷ Over the last decade, defence cooperation between the two countries has grown significantly. India conducts more annual military exercises with the U.S. than any other country and is becoming one of the U.S. defence industry's largest arms markets. In 2015, the U.S. sold \$3 billion in arms to India after selling \$13.9 billion between 2011 and 2014.²⁸

But things escalated fast from Obama's leave to Trump taking office. Xi Jinping assured Obama in 2015 that the South China Sea Island would not be militarised. Three years later, the South China Sea was heavily militarised, President Xi's term had no limit, making him China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong, and Chinese foreign policy priorities addressed at the 19th Party Congress confirmed the end of China's "hide and bide" period, demonstrating the country's growing interest in becoming a more influential player on the global stage.²⁹ All of these developments pushed the Trump administration to pursue a more aggressive Asia-Pacific strategy, keeping India close as its predecessors did but expecting Delhi to take on more regional responsibilities. Since taking office, the Trump administration has endorsed the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and pledged to defend Asia from Chinese ambitions. The 2017 National Security Strategy described "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order"³⁰ with "China using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda".³¹ To ensure a favourable balance of power in the region for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the strategy emphasised a strong commitment to and close cooperation with allies and partners, particularly the quadrilateral alliance (QUAD) of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia.

Thus, "Indo-Pacific" differs from "Asia-Pacific", and the U.S. renamed its oldest and largest Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command to emphasise India's

²⁶ A. Panda, "What the Recently Concluded US-India COMCASA Means," *The Diplomat*, last modified September 9, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/what-the-recently-concluded-us-india-comcasa-means/>.

²⁷ S.A. Philip, "The 3 Foundational Agreements with US and What They Mean for India's Military Growth," *The Print*, last modified October 27, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/the-3-foundational-agreements-with-us-and-what-they-mean-for-indias-military-growth/531795/>.

²⁸ S. Kumar, "How Obama Revived US-Indian Relations," *The National Interest*, last modified June 6, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-obama-revived-us-indian-relations-16473>.

²⁹ T. Phillips, "Xi Jinping Becomes Most Powerful Leader Since Mao with China's Change to Constitution," *The Guardian*, last modified October 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/xi-jinping-mao-thought-on-socialism-china-constitution>.

³⁰ D.J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: Executive Office of The President), last modified December, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

³¹ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 46.

growing importance to the Pentagon.³² While the IPS was primarily military in nature, with a more aggressive approach to maritime patrolling, an infrastructure and trade component was included to counter Beijing's BRI. It envisioned a region where "all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules, norms, and fair competition principles".³³ Washington named its larger strategic area of interest, from India's west coast to the U.S.'s western shores, the Indo-Pacific to acknowledge India's rise as a global power and major defence partner. The security papers emphasise India's role because Washington believes "the increasing convergence of U.S. and Indian interests and values offers the best opportunity to defend the rules-based global system".³⁴

The U.S.-India relationship is one of the most important partnerships in the twenty-first century, realised long before the Trump administration's support for the IPS. India shares the IPS's concerns about recent regional developments. In this regard, the coalition between the United States and India in the IPS seems, at a cursory glance, to be rational as far as the power relations in the region have played thus far. India benefits from its Indian Ocean location, and Washington can help it build and improve maritime security in the IOR to challenge Beijing, especially in the Malacca Strait, where most of China's Middle Eastern oil passes.³⁵ The United States has complimented India's concerns in Pakistan and its role in Afghanistan, as well as India's Act East policy. Washington has cut Pakistan's funding and wants India to shoulder more responsibility in Afghanistan. Both nations recognise the importance of Southeast Asia to a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asian order. According to the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, the U.S. wanted to "broaden and strengthen"³⁶ its partnerships with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act of the IPS offers South Asian countries financially sound and transparent alternatives to the BRI.³⁷

³² I. Ali, "In Symbolic Nod to India, US Pacific Command Changes Name," *Reuters*, last modified May 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-india-idUSKCN1IV2Q2>.

³³ The Department of Defense, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnership and Promoting a Networked Region," last modified June 1, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

³⁴ R.W. Tillerson, *Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson* (Center for Strategic & International Studies), last modified October 17, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

³⁵ A. Banerjee, "Indian Navy looks to dominate Malacca Straits," *The Tribune*, last modified June 12, 2017, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/nation/indian-navy-looks-to-dominate-malacca-straits-421162>.

³⁶ The Department of Defense, United States of America, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," last modified June 1, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

³⁷ The Department of Defense, United States of America, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," 6.

Given that Biden called the “US-India partnership” “the defining relationship of the 21st century”,³⁸ India should remain a key ally. Biden’s South Asia foreign policy will likely resemble Trump’s. The new leadership will shape the IPS’s future, and while U.S.-China relations are expected to be less combative and hostile than under Trump, Delhi and Washington will likely push back against Beijing’s rise when it conflicts with their security concerns, and South Asia could be a setting ground. That goal depends on the stability of the US-Indo relationship and whether the growing ideological divides discussed below, and the non-binding alliance system could outweigh the nations’ shared interests in forging cooperative structures in the South Asian region and beyond.

After President Joe Biden took office, the first virtual Quad summit covered many topics. The massive effort to deliver a billion COVID-19 vaccines by 2022 and building engagements in sectors like climate change made the grouping seem like more than just a security alliance.³⁹ To a greater extent, these engagements hinge on the premise that these are democratic states that value the rule-based order and seek to counter Beijing’s growing influence in the region, which they view as incompatible with their vision of “free and open”.⁴⁰ In a brief Indo-Pacific strategy fact sheet, the Biden administration highlighted China’s challenges, the QUAD’s effectiveness, and its support for “India’s continued rise and regional leadership” to ensure a “free and open” Indo-Pacific. The larger report called India a “like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active and connected to Southeast Asia, a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora, and an engine of regional growth and development”.⁴¹ These documents often portray China as a threat to the region and India as a “like-minded” state, but India’s China policy has been more complicated because it has observed Beijing’s movements nearby and recognises the potential dangers of its expanding military might.⁴² Thus, current geopolitical tensions in the region and beyond have helped explain India’s scripted role in the Indo-Pacific and how its policies have responded to larger agendas.

³⁸ M. Kugelman, “How will Biden’s strategy on South Asia differ from Trump’s?,” *East Asia Forum*, last modified January 20, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/01/10/how-will-bidens-strategy-on-south-asia-differ-from-trumps/>.

³⁹ P. Saha, “First Quad leaders meeting: An agenda beyond security,” Observer Research Foundation, last modified March 16, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/first-quad-leaders-meeting-agenda-beyond-security/>.

⁴⁰ The White House, “FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” last modified February 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-indo-pacific-strategy-of-the-united-states/>.

⁴¹ The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” last modified February, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

⁴² J. Panda, “India’s Quad Calculus and China,” *The Asan Forum*, last modified June 23, 2021, <https://theasanforum.org/indias-quad-calculus-and-china/>.

Despite being a rehashed concept, the Indo-Pacific has gained momentum, especially regarding security for certain regional powers. In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe paraphrased 16th-century Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh's "Confluence of the Two Seas" vision to present the Pacific and Indian Oceans "bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity"⁴³ to the Indian parliament. He mentioned an Asia where democracies on both sides of the ocean would revive these ideals, citing ancient philosophies. Recent events have undoubtedly prompted a closer examination of these principles, particularly regarding India's priorities in associating with global powers, its place in the region, and its strategies. Thus, Delhi's role in the Indo-Pacific has been broadly categorised as a developing regional power, its evolving relations with China, and its participation in various formal and informal security arrangements in related regions.

Since the Indo-Pacific was created to include the security interests of powers outside the imagined system, India has been at the centre of reimagining the region, mainly when the China challenge has arisen. QUAD members have shaped the Indo-Pacific by presenting common issues as threats.⁴⁴ The forum creates a region based on interconnected threats and responses through narratives. China, particularly Foreign Minister Wang Yi, sees this as a geopolitical irritant. China called the U.S.'s Asia Pacific focus an "Asian NATO" due to its "5 (Five eyes) 4 (Quad) 3 (AUKUS) 2 (bilateral military alliances) posture".⁴⁵ India and the other QUAD nations have approached the idea of an Asian NATO cautiously in their foreign policy directives, which has increased Beijing's vigilance. Delhi is generally opposed to "playing the democracy card in its foreign relations", so the creation and continued institutional status of NATO as a Western security collective has been met with ambivalence.⁴⁶ However, the very nature of these discussion points to a threat perception that could herald a new era of competition among regional giants.

Geopolitical shifts that have created and sustained new hotspots have raised questions about how strategies reflecting an almost united liberal front can gain momentum as aspirations seemingly diverge on specific issues. Even if QUAD were to be created as an informal forum to fight "aggressions to disrupt the rule of law", specifically against China, nations other than the U.S. have been careful to frame the issue as an "ideological contest between democracies and authoritarian

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "'Confluence of the Two Seas' Speech by H.E. Mr. S. Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India," last modified August 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

⁴⁴ B. Chand and Z. Garcia, "Constituting the Indo-Pacific: Securitisation and the Processes of Region-Making," *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 52 (2021): 15.

⁴⁵ "US trying to create Asian NATO with blocs to 'suppress' China: FM W. Yi," *The Economic Times*, last modified March 7, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-trying-to-create-asian-nato-with-blocs-to-suppress-china-fm-wang-yi/articleshow/90059130.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴⁶ V. Sahni, "Towards A New NATO Strategic Concept: A View from India," Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, last modified October, 2010, March 22, 2022, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/07517-20101122.pdf>.

states, or liberal and illiberal regimes”.⁴⁷ Asia may be a confluence of ideologies and ambitions, but that they are not static or congruent.

Therefore, the relationship between India and the democratic countries of the Indo-Pacific and how that relationship affects the different strands of coexisting and competing interests is a valid topic for rational inquiry. However, while the United States Indo-Pacific strategies have depicted India and China in various states of dispute, India’s neighbourhood presents a different challenge for both nations. Many see India as a model of opposition to China, but its interests are more likely to be driven by its perception of regional authority than global liberal agendas. Allies in the Indo-Pacific region work together to defend a “free and open” agenda. However, regional powers have many ways to define and pursue this goal, each influenced by its own realities. India’s Indo-Pacific role depends on its increasingly complicated relations with China.

India-China engagements in South Asia

South Asia is the meeting point of China and India. The Asian subcontinent is one of many, but China and India place a high value on it. The BRI project’s expansion into South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, India’s primary sphere of influence, worries Delhi. Beijing can use BRI to achieve strategic and political goals, undermining India’s regional power. India’s regional leadership in South Asia also draws attention to military, economic, and non-traditional security issues. Since India borders almost all South Asian countries, its neighbours remain wary of Delhi.⁴⁸ And that, in turn, makes China look like an alternative regional power.⁴⁹ China offers viable economic components for many, leading to India’s caustic approach and concerns for future frictions since the India-China relationship remains asymmetric, with a growing trade surplus in Beijing’s favour.⁵⁰ Politically, the two countries collaborate better on global issues like climate change and in other multi-lateral platforms like BRICS. The dispute over the international boundary, however, remains. Military standoffs along disputed borders have been avoided due to peace

⁴⁷ L. Lee, “The Quad has a strategy to counter China and Russia: be a force for global good without ideological warfare,” *The Conversation*, last modified February 12, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/the-quad-has-a-strategy-to-counter-china-and-russia-be-a-force-for-global-good-without-ideological-warfare-176555>.

⁴⁸ S. Raghavan, “Stability in Southern Asia: India’s Perspective,” in *Crux of Asia: China, India and the Emerging Global Order*, eds. A.J. Tellis and S. Misrki (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 135–142.

⁴⁹ S. Kumar, “China’s South Asia Policy in the ‘New Era’,” *India Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (June, 2019): 151; A. Giri, “China aims to create an alternative regional bloc in South Asia,” *The Kathmandu Post*, last modified July 11, 2021, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2021/07/11/china-aims-to-create-an-alternative-regional-bloc-in-south-asia>; B. Ghimire and A. Pathak, “China Is Providing an Alternative Regional Framework for South Asia,” *The Diplomat*, last modified July 30, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/china-is-providing-an-alternative-regional-framework-for-south-asia/>.

⁵⁰ Raghavan, “Stability in Southern Asia: India’s Perspective,” 139.

and tranquillity treaties. Despite this, China's armed forces and regional military balances along its borders have improved.

Major conflicts have erupted between the two countries over connectivity projects, particularly the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.⁵¹ Moreover, Pakistan's willingness to host Chinese naval facilities in Chinese-run Gwadar have alarmed Indian security officials. Chinese companies funding and building commercial port facilities around the IOR is seen as China encircling India and Delhi is hesitant to allow China-friendly projects in its neighbourhood. Beijing's South Asian policy is viewed through the 'String of Pearls theory', which states that China will increase its naval presence in the IOR by building civilian maritime infrastructure in friendly states.

Booz Allen Hamilton described Beijing's expanding presence in the IOR as a "string of pearls" in a report titled *Energy Futures in Asia*. This led to the idea that China was, according to the US Director of Net Assessment in 2005, "building strategic relationships along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interests, but also to serve broad security objectives".⁵² Pakistan's Gwadar port and Bangladesh's Chittagong port are considered regional pearls that could boost China's position. Indian maritime geostrategic thinkers worry about the situation because they believe India must dominate the Indian Ocean for security and prevent other nations from entering. The Modi government's "necklace of diamonds" strategy, yet to take off, builds naval bases from East to Central Asia to counter the string of pearls as "a counter-encirclement strategy".⁵³

As part of its "March West" strategy, China is also not far behind on land. China wants to trade and invest in South Asia to "connect all of Asia, from East Asia to the Middle East (technically West Asia), and then to Africa and Europe".⁵⁴ The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor would connect Yunnan to Kolkata's ports, and the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, signed by China and Nepal, would connect Nepal to the sensitive TAR, considered an entry point into South Asia. As China's interests in the Indian Ocean increased, South Asian states that supported the One-China policy were viewed as "important partners in restructuring regional and global institutions, deflecting Western

⁵¹ D.P. Singh, "Strength and Challenges of OBOR Initiative: Indian Perspective," *Journal of National Law University Delhi* 6, no. 1 (2019): 65–77.

⁵² V. Sakhuja, "Energy Transportation in the Indian Ocean: Geostrategic and Security Considerations," in *Energy Security and the Indian Ocean Region*, eds. D. Rumley and S. Chaturvedi (Routledge: New York, 2019), 64, 65.

⁵³ A. Javaid, "What is Necklace of Diamonds Strategy?," *Jagran Josh*, last modified July 21, 2020, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/necklace-of-diamond-strategy-1592404137-1>.

⁵⁴ USIP Senior Study Group Report, *China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2020), 25.

pressure on issues such as human rights and climate change". China's priorities shifted to South Asia in the early twenty-first century.⁵⁵

India opposes such projects out of concern that China will "contain" its regional dominance in South Asia. Modern India has seen South Asia as a security ring.⁵⁶ It led to many "ineffective" policy decisions, with neighbours often "internationalising bilateral disputes with India" and playing the "China card".⁵⁷ Due to its distance and political neutrality, China has long been seen as a more attractive economic solution for diversifying trade and connectivity opportunities in the face of Indian dominance. Beijing does not actively challenge Indian dominance in the region but has threatened Delhi's influence systems since 1947. The acquisition of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and China's construction of a military base near the Maldives complicate Delhi's view of South Asia as its backyard, where it seeks a more central role.

Delhi's relative superiority stems from India's location in South Asia, but China complicates matters. China and India have clashed twice on their borders since 2017, resulting in a protracted military standoff that has raised regional tensions and strained economic ties. After a 70-day standoff in Doklam on the Bhutan-China border near the Siliguri Corridor, or chicken neck, which connects seven North Eastern Indian states to mainland India, India-China relations plummeted in 2017. The Indian Army prevented China from building Doklam roads but was advised to declare victory cautiously despite the Chinese retreat after a standoff. Beijing may have been under pressure to avoid a diplomatic disaster due to the Indian military's surprise attack and the approaching 19th Party Congress. However, China's ten-week Doklam escalation, longer than 2013 and 2014 border clashes, showed its resolve.⁵⁸ Sino-Indo relations were strained by the incident and even though Doklam ended in a tie, it hinted at a larger dispute between the two heavyweights, highlighting unresolved historical grievances surrounding the McMahon line.⁵⁹

A new border spat erupted in 2020 at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, India, after Delhi increased infrastructure investment in the disputed region. Concerns about the McMahon line, which India considers to be the border with China, sparked the 1962 India-China war as well after Beijing said it

⁵⁵ USIP Senior Study Group Report, "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia," 126.

⁵⁶ P.B. Rana and X. Ji, *China's Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Asia and Policy Agenda* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 126.

⁵⁷ C. Wagner, "The Role of India and China in South Asia," *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 4 (2016): 317.

⁵⁸ M.T. Fravel, "Why India Did Not 'Win' the Standoff with China," *War on the Rocks*, last modified September 1, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/why-india-did-not-win-the-standoff-with-china/>; W. Joel, S. Limaye and N. Samaranayake, "Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas," *War on the Rocks*, last modified June 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/doklam-one-year-later-chinas-long-game-in-the-himalayas/>.

⁵⁹ P.S. Jha, "Neither Win nor Loss, the End of the Doklam Standoff is an Opportunity," *The Wire*, last modified August 28, 2017, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/doklam-standoff-ends>.

did not recognise the line and that the LAC (yet to be defined) was the real border. Zhou told his Indian counterpart on November 7, 1959, that China does not recognise the McMahon line due to “British aggression”.⁶⁰ During the 2020 military stand-off, the Chinese government refused to recognise Ladakh and urged India not to build military infrastructure in disputed areas.⁶¹ Since then, both states have tried to reclaim the area by building infrastructure and deploying patrols, but none have been as violent as the recent clash. Border disputes are unlikely to be resolved soon, but they set the stage for future India-China interactions.

It also offered a narrative in which this event could start a dialogue that could resolve the historical dispute by clearly delineating the border. The conflict also demonstrated the limits of foreign powers in mediating disputes between India and China, which has implications for the future of India-China relations. Both countries avoid using force and are careful not to upset regional power dynamics influenced by other countries. Despite meeting in Moscow for informal talks on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in late 2020, both states rejected a US mediation offer during the LAC standoff. After the 2018 Doklam crisis, both countries tried to reconcile. President Xi and Prime Minister Modi held a historic informal summit in Wuhan in April 2018 and agreed to cooperate and resolve many issues peacefully.⁶² The Wuhan meeting illuminates another crucial IPS factor: China-India convergence. Thus, India and China appear wary of actions that give foreign powers leverage, especially ideologically. Both nations prioritize national interests while balancing international relations.

Border de-escalation does not reduce regional tensions. Due to China’s growing presence, the India-China conflict will impact India’s external and internal balancing. China prioritized South Asia as its Indian Ocean interests grew in the 21st century. China’s support for Pakistan in Kashmir, which contradicts its non-interference in regional inter-state conflicts, its boundary disputes with India, and its growing fear of U.S. strategic involvement complicate Indo-Chinese economic and security relations and their regional impact. India wants security in the Indian subcontinent and IOR, which could lead to “adversarial, antagonistic, and contentious” political relations with China by 2020.⁶³ Thus, Delhi is warming to Indo-Pacific

⁶⁰ “Premier Chou En-lai’s [Zhou Enlai’s] Letter to Prime Minister Nehru,” History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Documents on the Sino-Indian Boundary Question, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/175959.pdf?v=1e8bdb140ea9671eecba1c252bca0865>.

⁶¹ S. Roy, “Hardening Stance, China Rejects Ladakh UT, raises 1959 Claim Line,” *The Indian Express*, last modified September 30, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-ladakh-lac-6637632/>.

⁶² S. Godbole, “Wuhan Summit: An Important Signal of Intent by India and China,” Brookings Institute, last modified May 23, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/05/23/wuhan-summit-an-important-signal-of-intent-by-india-and-china/>.

⁶³ S. Menon, “India-China Ties: The Future Holds ‘Antagonistic Cooperation’, not War,” *The Wire*, last modified December 7, 2020, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-china-ties-expect-antagonistic-cooperation-future-not-war>.

countries that share its navigation and security concerns. In this light, the US-India IPS coalition is logical.

Indo-US ties: Points for departure

Democracy and partnership

As aforementioned, while Washington and Delhi share many interests in the IPS and rising China, there are glaring differences. Biden defends democracy in his fight against Beijing, saying, “This is a battle between the utility of democracies in the twenty-first century and autocracies”.⁶⁴ He emphasised Indo-Pacific as a “free, open, inclusive, healthy, democratically anchored, and coercion-free region”.⁶⁵ In February 2021, Biden and Modi discussed “the importance of working with like-minded countries to ensure a rules-based international order and a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region”.⁶⁶ Given that Biden has called the U.S.-India partnership “the defining relationship of the 21st century”,⁶⁷ India should remain a key ally for Washington.

As US President Joe Biden seeks to revitalise the Quad with liberal connotations in mind, India’s projected liberal democratic status has come under fire, having been classified as an “electoral autocracy” under the Modi government in a *V-Dem Institute* report.⁶⁸ India’s democratic ideals’ have been on a “downward slide” after ignoring global freedom and democracy indices.⁶⁹ Human rights issues and free speech criticisms continue to pile up, as Delhi has developed its own “indices to assess global democracy and press freedom”.⁷⁰ *Freedom House* ranked the country as “partly free”, like most South Asian nations.⁷¹

⁶⁴ N. Gaouette, “Biden says US Faces Battle to ‘Prove Democracy Works’,” CNN Politics, last modified March 26, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/25/politics/biden-autocracies-versus-democracies/index.html>.

⁶⁵ The White House, “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: “The Spirit of the Quad”,” last modified March 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad>.

⁶⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Telephone Conversation Between Prime Minister and His Excellency J.R. Biden, President of the United States of America,” last modified February 8, 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33484/Telephone_conversation_between_Prime_Minister_and_His_Excellency_Joseph_R_Biden_President_of_the_United_States_of_America.

⁶⁷ “Joe Biden believes India-US partnership is defining relationship of 21st Century,” *The Indian Express*, last modified November 8, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/joe-biden-believes-india-us-partnership-is-defining-relationship-of-21st-century-7008669/>.

⁶⁸ N. Alizada *et al.*, *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (Gothenberg: University of Gothenberg, V-Dem Institute, 2021).

⁶⁹ S. Ganguly, “India’s “Electoral Autocracy” Hits Back,” *Foreign Policy*, last modified March 19, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/19/electoral-autocracy-india-modi-democracy-rankings-freedom-house/>.

⁷⁰ Ganguly, “India’s “Electoral Autocracy” Hits Back.”

⁷¹ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege,” last modified February, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

Therefore, India's relationship with the U.S. and the Quad states stems from the threat perceptions regarding Beijing's aggression and disregard for the rule of law and less with the belief that they are democratic nations that oppose China. No matter how much less combative and hostile US-China relations are than under Trump, Delhi and Washington will likely push back against Beijing's rise when it conflicts with their own security concerns. The effectiveness of this goal will depend on the partnership's stability and whether growing ideological differences and the non-binding alliance system outweigh the nations' shared interests in building cooperative structures in South Asia and beyond. In this context, the U.S.-India partnership may be tested if domestic politics influence international norms and practices.

Short of an alliance

According to the IPS, the United States and India have a "strategic partnership", not an alliance, which does not obligate states to military cooperation or the use of force in defence of an ally. They do not suggest a long-term commitment to peaceful change based on shared institutions, identities, or values, and as opposed to alliances, are ongoing bilateral agreements that are flexible and evolving.⁷² New Delhi's decision to form a "quasi-alliance" with Washington enables it to raise its international profile without making difficult strategic decisions.⁷³ The idea is to be able to pursue pragmatic bilateral relations and maintain decisional autonomy.

Despite the two countries' notable defence arrangement, observers question its maturity. Washington and Delhi's many dialogues, engagements, and military exercises have not had the expected impact. While the US expects more interoperability with allies and partners in the future, India may not agree. India may want to "consult and coordinate with the U.S. on mutual defence matters but operate in parallel rather than jointly".⁷⁴ India conducts the most joint military exercises with the U.S., but the interactions are too infrequent to advance interoperability, and the two countries may struggle to conduct a joint operation when needed. For instance, the U.S. conducts more military exercises with Singapore than India. They do not have a binding military treaty like the U.S. does with Japan and Australia either.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a key IPS component where "discourses target China's counter-normative foreign policy".⁷⁵ Even the quadrilateral

⁷² D.P. Envall and I. Hall, "Asian Strategic Partnerships: New Practices and Regional Security Governance," *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 87–105.

⁷³ A.D. Muraviev, D. Ahlawat and L. Hughes, "India's Security Dilemma: Engaging Big Powers While Retaining Strategic Autonomy," *International Politics* 59 (2021): 1120.

⁷⁴ W.C. Ladwig and A. Mukherjee, "The United States, India, and the Future of the Indo-Pacific Strategy," The National Bureau of Asian Research, last modified June 20, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-united-states-india-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

⁷⁵ B. Chand and Z. Garcia, "Constituting the Indo-Pacific: Securitisation and the Processes of Region-making," *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 52 (2021): 15.

alliance is fluid. The alliance formed over a decade ago to contain China was initially called the trilateral strategic dialogue (TSD) between Australia, Japan, and the U.S. QUAD was formed in 2006–2007 to promote a free and open region, and members participated in Exercise Malabar in 2007, a US-India military exercise in the Indian Ocean since 1992. China warned all parties about the agreement and Australia withdrew after a leadership change to avoid antagonising Beijing, its largest trade partner. This ended the alliance. QUAD discussions have resumed since 2014–2015, but it is different. In 2017 and 2018, India refused to invite Australia to Malabar due to Chinese reservations. However, in 2020 Australia was invited to the exercise. India's stance on China is complicated because it has observed Beijing's trails in and around the country and recognises the challenges its growing military might poses.⁷⁶ China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi described QUAD as the U.S.'s interest to envision and actualise an "Asian NATO"⁷⁷ while Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar called Asian NATO a "lazy analogy".⁷⁸ The resulting threat perceptions emphasise both the demonstration of strength and the unintended dangers of exercises such as the Malabar drills.

India's defence ties with Moscow are another point of contention. Russia meets 62 per cent of India's defence needs,⁷⁹ and its proposed purchase of Russian-built S-400 air defence systems prompted U.S. sanctions, although Washington did not follow through. Similarly, the respective policies on the Russian-Ukraine war, where alliances and common agendas have led to the recognition that, while Asia may be a confluence of ideologies and ambitions, it is far from static or congruent. India continued to buy oil from Russia despite reports of escalating conflict in Ukraine. Biden responded, "The Quad is somewhat shaky on some of this, with the possible exception of India, but Japan has been extremely strong - as has Australia - in dealing with Putin's aggression".⁸⁰ However, the White House National Security Council Director for the Indo-Pacific acknowledged Delhi's long-term relationship with Moscow and the "unsurprising" policy move, and advised providing

⁷⁶ J.P. Panda, "China as a Revisionist Power in Indo-Pacific and India's Perception: A Power-Partner Contention," *Journal of Contemporary China* (May, 2020): 10, 11.

⁷⁷ "US Trying to Create Asian NATO with Blocs to 'Suppress' China: FM W. Yi," *The Economic Times*, last modified March 7, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-trying-to-create-asian-nato-with-blocs-to-suppress-china-fm-wang-yi/articleshow/90059130.cms?from=mdr>.

⁷⁸ "“Lazy Analogy”: S. Jaishankar on Comparisons of Quad with NATO," NDTV, last modified February 20, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lazy-analogy-s-jaishankar-on-comparisons-of-quad-with-nato-2778629>.

⁷⁹ A. Shukla, "Russia Rues its Declining Role as Arms Supplier to India," *Business Standard*, last modified April 15, 2018, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/russia-rues-its-declining-role-as-arms-supplier-to-india-118041400523_1.html.

⁸⁰ "US President Biden Calls India 'Shaky' in Russia Confrontation," *The Times of India*, last modified March 22, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-president-biden-calls-india-shaky-in-russia-confrontation/articleshow/90364971.cms>.

Delhi with alternatives.⁸¹ Even if statements can be retracted and explained, they spread ideas about how the West believes India should act, rather than how it actually does. Delhi's stance reflects a consistent policy of strategic autonomy.

The Global Times, a Chinese news source, did not waste any time in portraying Biden's remarks as evidence of Washington's hypocrisy, calling its attitude toward India "disrespectful" and referring to states that backed Washington as "US megaphones".⁸² A simple but effective illustration of how the way texts are written alone can spark political gambits in the region's rhetoric. Since Washington also warned Beijing of "consequences" if it supported Russia, Beijing may become a long-term critic and actively use these arguments against the US in the region. India's own statements relied on its long-standing relationships with both states, claiming independent histories with each and a strategy that was determined by those relationships. Over the years, Delhi's position on strategic autonomy has been more or less apparent.

Strategic autonomy

Strategic autonomy has defined Delhi's approach to greater power participation in and around the region, and has been described as a "mutation of realism and India's traditional non-aligned posture".⁸³ The Minister of External Affairs of India, S. Jaishankar said that Delhi's policies must be based on "having many balls in the air at once and dropping none".⁸⁴ India continues to represent the developing south, making it "a more South-Western power than the West may desire".⁸⁵ Thus, it would continue to more generally represent the developing South. It would be much more cautious than traditional Western liberal states in stating its absolute alignments.

Strategic partnership or strategic autonomy are modernised versions of realpolitik, allowing states to pursue bilateral, regional, global, and domestic agendas without compromising freedom of action.⁸⁶ Such alliances are easier to sell at

⁸¹ "'Unsatisfactory' But 'Unsurprising': US on India's Stand on Russia-Ukraine War," *Mint*, last modified March 25, 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/unsatisfactory-but-unsurprising-us-on-india-s-stand-on-russia-ukraine-war-11648218442010.html>.

⁸² "Biden's criticism of India's neutrality on Russia exposes US hypocrisy," *Global Times*, last modified March 22, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1256566.shtml>.

⁸³ K. Bommakanti, "India's Strategic Autonomy Dilemma and the Rapprochement with the United States," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, March 20, 2009, https://idsa.in/event/IndiavsUS_gmonsonis_200309.

⁸⁴ S. Jaishankar, "External Affairs Minister's Speech at the 4th Ramnath Goenka Lecture, 2019," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, last modified November 14, 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32038>.

⁸⁵ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), 120.

⁸⁶ V. Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing Without Alliances* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

home and help protect the country's image abroad because both parties can maintain a fiction of equality. India's strategic engagement with all powers allows it to be flexible in the face of diverging interests.⁸⁷ For instance, despite Russian and Chinese objections, Delhi joined QUAD, and buys Russian weapons despite U.S. sanctions. Similarly, India's Strategic Partnership with Russia is also a measure of strategic autonomy,⁸⁸ and its position on Ukraine is a case in point. For example, along with China and the United Arab Emirates, it abstained on a UN vote against Russia, balancing historical ties with Moscow. It also abstained on a Moscow-backed UNGA resolution to highlight Ukraine's humanitarian crisis, demonstrating alignment with Western allies. Delhi's policies toward Russia may change due to Beijing's ties to Moscow, but it is unlikely to be due to "the Biden administration's democracy-versus-autocracy framing" but rather to a "strategic dissonance"⁸⁹ between the countries.

India's strategic autonomy allows it to maintain a pragmatic assessment of its interests and make decisions that serve those interests. India's strategic behaviour is a newer version of its non-alignment policy, in which the country seeks alignment but only on an issue-by-issue basis.⁹⁰ India's partnership with the U.S. pushes alignment boundaries. Except for arms sales, the US is India's most important strategic partner since independence. India has essentially decided to align, but on its own terms. All powers have larger economic and political goals in today's interdependent and globalising world and pursuing strategic alliances has emerged as the preferred course of action.

Same thread highlights Delhi's role in and beyond the Indo-Pacific and Washington's regard for India in the larger geopolitical structure it largely leads. Washington has sought an ally in New Delhi and recognised the regional powerhouse's potential, especially against the alleged threat of Beijing. However, their perspectives on the alliances and their long-term consequences may be flawed. Delhi recognises Washington's vision but defines its own position due to strategic autonomy and growing Sino-Indo relations. Delhi is central to the politics of the region it governs, so Washington may need to consider whether it shares India's strategic goals in this case.

⁸⁷ Muraviev, Ahlawat and Hughes, "India's Security Dilemma: Engaging Big Powers While Retaining Strategic Autonomy."

⁸⁸ R. Mukherjee, "Looking West, Acting east: India's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (May, 2019): 46, 47.

⁸⁹ R.P. Rajagopalan, "The Democracy Turning its Back on Ukraine," Observer Research Foundation, last modified March 15, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-democracy-turning-its-back-on-ukraine/>.

⁹⁰ J.M. Smith, "Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations," War on the Rocks, last modified November 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/strategic-autonomy-and-u-s-indian-relations/>.

Systemic realities

The Indo-Pacific is a contentious map-making phenomenon, whether defined as an oceanic region, a super-region, or not a region.⁹¹ Historically, regions were the building blocks of global order and non-systems, but in today's transnational world, the concept of 'region' defies any standard model of contextual geopolitics. While the Pacific and Indian Oceans are "strategically linked", the Indo-Pacific region is evolving "gradually and partially" rather than being "integrated".⁹² It would be wrong to downplay or simplify the Asia-Pacific region's many subregions. In this situation, Indo-Pacific space is a functional space made up of strategic similarities driven by geopolitical interests. The constructed region is the result of those who define it. Barry Buzan defines a security complex as the mutual security interests within a system.⁹³ Along with Weaver, he developed the regional security complex (RSC) theory to explore how neighbouring countries with shared borders develop interdependent security agendas. In South Asia, the military, borders, China, and India's perception of power were all taken into account.⁹⁴ Thus, while the IPS views the Indo-Pacific as an imagined system in which like-minded allies work against "free and open" agenda risks, regional powers have a construct attachment that is distinct from extra-regional actors and has numerous options for defining and approaching this objective.

The "Asian century" will affect Asia and the world.⁹⁵ As a result of China's rise and the expansion of cultural and economic exchanges in the region, the Asianisation of global threads and Asia itself have determined regional realities and created future effects. The idea that Asia may become a functioning system does not mean it will allow a system like the EU to emerge.⁹⁶ Conflicts in Asia, which stem from territorial lines, external power involvement, and ideological differences, have been and may continue to be crucial to the system's operation. India has its own sphere of influence, as "India is the only Quad country to face both maritime and land boundary challenges from China".⁹⁷ India has a potential role in countering Beijing's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, but "the Indian Ocean and India's land

⁹¹ T. Doyle and D. Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹² Doyle and Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific*, 7.

⁹³ B. Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd, 1983), 106.

⁹⁴ B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁹⁵ P. Khanna, *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

⁹⁶ P. Khanna, "Asia is Becoming a Regional System but it Won't be Another EU: Futurologist Parag Khanna," *India Today*, last modified July 4, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/asia-is-becoming-a-regional-system-but-it-won-t-be-another-eu-futurologist-parag-khanna-1697080-2020-07-04>.

⁹⁷ S.R. Chinoy, "India and the Changing Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 4 (2020): 22.

borders will remain first order concerns”.⁹⁸ India’s membership in ASEAN, the Quad, the SCO, and the BRICS shows its support for Quad principles, engagement with China, and ASEAN’s centrality in the Indo-Pacific, which resembles a multipolar Asia paradigm over a zero-sum alliance system.

While India’s policy in Asia may be driven by strategic alignment and decisional autonomy, its policy in South Asia may have unintended consequences. India has always thought it had a larger impact on South Asia, but it is wary of secondary powers whose interests may conflict with its own. Even when it has been open to other powers playing a role in the region, it has done so with the expectation that they will have a “force multiplier effect” on China.⁹⁹ India’s policy in South Asia is to send a clear message to internal and external powers that it will not tolerate disruptions to its dominance.¹⁰⁰ Delhi may be wary of any motivations that could jeopardise its position. In this scenario, while Southeast Asia is already multipolar, India’s strategic autonomy policy is appropriate. However, given its tendency to act as a regional hegemon, the policy in South Asia is somewhat paradoxical.

South Asian countries have welcomed Beijing’s expanded policies to reflect its growing interests in the region, as discussed. Delhi’s future strategic positioning could push South Asian countries toward adventurism. When Delhi supported non-alignment, the region rallied behind it; now that it only supports strategic arrangements, it may have a similar effect. The power of ideas in generating inter-subjective meaning leading to social practises that influence not only social structures, but also actors in the system has been well documented.¹⁰¹ There are already signs of it. Except for Bhutan, almost all South Asian countries interact strategically with China. China is the only country to sign a *Defense Cooperation Agreement* with Bangladesh¹⁰² and Nepal and China upgraded their ties to ‘Strategic Partnership’ during President Xi’s 2019 visit to Kathmandu.¹⁰³ Afghanistan and the Maldives also look to Beijing for help.

Small powers can benefit from great power competition by balancing economic and strategic ties. Small in this context refers to nations that, in terms of their political, economic, and military prowess, are relatively less capable than the

⁹⁸ Chinoy, “India and the Changing Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific,” 35.

⁹⁹ T. Madan, “Major Power Rivalry in South Asia,” Council on Foreign Relations, last modified 2021, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/DPmadanOct21_final_for_CMS.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ D.T. Hagerty, “India’s Regional Security Doctrine,” *Asian Survey* 31, no. 4 (1991): 351–363.

¹⁰¹ M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, “Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 391–416.

¹⁰² S. Yesmin, “The Changing Dynamics of China-Bangladesh Relations,” *The Daily Star*, last modified November 11, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/global-affairs/news/the-changing-dynamics-china-bangladesh-relations-1658695>.

¹⁰³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal, “Joint Statement Between Nepal and the People’s Republic of China,” October 13, 2019, <https://mofa.gov.np/joint-statement-between-nepal-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>.

regional superpowers.¹⁰⁴ States that, when grouped with the larger regional powers, essentially shrink in size,¹⁰⁵ have less sway in international affairs,¹⁰⁶ and are therefore subject to external pressures when enacting domestic policies.¹⁰⁷ Considering their evolving ties with both Beijing and Delhi, all South Asian non-nuclear states fall under this heading in this context. These states, which are not totally dependent on one another, have generally been looking for opportunities and options that are favourable to their individual growth. Many states viewed China and its BRI as an alternative route to achieving that objective. India, as was expected, responded to the initiative with a little less zeal and expressed incredibly specific concerns.

While the BRI would help many smaller countries develop infrastructure, alleviate electricity shortages, and promote tourism and industrial zones, there has been concern about the transparency of Chinese companies and their handling of such projects. “BRI projects in South Asia are especially corruption-prone because these countries are a hotbed of endemic corruption and entrenched kleptocracy”.¹⁰⁸ The economic fiasco in Sri Lanka cannot be attributed solely to Chinese lending, but it did help political actors pursue populist policies and commit mass corruption. The recent state-failure in Sri Lanka could be an example of South Asian adventurism.

Sri Lanka’s government mishandled its finances. The country spent more than it made and exported less. Sri Lanka’s credit ratings were downgraded in 2020, excluding it from international markets. The government depleted its foreign exchange reserves by 70 per cent in two years.¹⁰⁹ China claims to hold 10 per cent of Sri Lanka’s debt and ranks third among creditors after Japan and the ADB,¹¹⁰ but it has been largely silent on its support for the Rajapaksa, who dominated the island’s politics for nearly two decades and is largely to blame for the current situation. Rajapaksa’s showy populism propelled him to power over the years, largely on the benefits of collaborating with China.¹¹¹ Given China’s disinterest in Western human, political, and civil rights discourses, the camaraderie was convenient.

¹⁰⁴ R.R. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 15.

¹⁰⁵ E. Bjøl, “The Small State in International Politics,” in *Small States in International Relations*, eds. A. Schou and A. Brundtland (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971).

¹⁰⁶ C. Clarke and T. Payne, *Politics, Security, and Development in Small States* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

¹⁰⁷ M. Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 40, 41.

¹⁰⁸ Rana and Ji, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Asia and Policy Agenda*, 128.

¹⁰⁹ D. Ghoshal and A. Pal, “Explainer: How Sri Lanka spiralled into crisis,” *Reuters*, last modified July 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-sri-lanka-spiralled-into-crisis-2022-07-13/>.

¹¹⁰ “Accusations Over China Creating a ‘Debt Trap’ in Sri Lanka an Organized Smear by the West and India Against BRI,” *Global Times*, last modified April 7, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1258752.shtml>.

¹¹¹ “Editorial: Enter the Dragon,” *The Sunday Times*, last modified November 2, 2014, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/141102/editorial/enter-the-dragon-125695.html>.

Similar examples can be found in Nepal¹¹² and Maldives,¹¹³ where political leaders have used China ties to push populist narratives. The Hambantota port case in 2017 made South Asian countries more alert when negotiating with China on financial lending and infrastructure projects, but Beijing's inflated role in their development has pushed political actors to use ties with China as a bargaining tool in domestic and international arenas. In this scenario, it is unclear how comfortable Delhi will be with U.S. activities in these countries under IPS, especially since the strategy makes China more actively involved in South Asian states to counter Washington's influence. One example is Nepal's ratification of the 500-million-dollar Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact. In Kathmandu, the MCC debate sparked a narrative battle between China and the U.S. In an unprecedented move, Beijing strongly opposed ratification of the pact because it was seen as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy to encircle China and raised concerns about US-Nepal ties.¹¹⁴

The U.S. has historically preferred India to lead South Asia, excluding Pakistan and Afghanistan, and been sensitive to India's systemic reality. Meanwhile, Washington's Pakistan policy has caused mistrust in U.S.-India relations, which has complicated matters. As a result, US-India diplomatic discussions about the region have focused primarily on Pakistan and Afghanistan, with little attention paid to other countries where India prefers to take the lead. With the implementation of IPS, however, this situation will change. Again, the United States and India will require clarity regarding the nature of their Strategic Partnership in South Asia.

Conclusions

The United States' support for the Indo-Pacific Strategy stems from rising China's threat perceptions at a time when American power is declining. It also reveals the emergence of great-power competition in global politics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The difference between the Indo-Pacific region and the IPS is important because it shows how different policies, like the IPS, Look East, and the BRI, all try to deal with changing geopolitical complexities in a rising Asian system and create strategic space for influence. The IPS alliances indicate Washington's desire to restrain and balance growing Chinese influence in the region and beyond, while countries party to it share a geographical proximity with Beijing and perceive offensive intentions. India's role as a rising great power is critical to Washington's power balance in these circumstances. Delhi is an ally worth investing in due to its

¹¹² R. Iyengar, "What the Nepalese Prime Minister's Visit to China Says About the Wider Politics of Asia," *Time*, last modified March 24, 2016, <https://time.com/4270239/nepal-prime-minister-oli-visit-china-beijing-india/>.

¹¹³ S. Miglani, "Modi Gives \$1.4 Billion Aid to Maldives Amid Worry Over its China Debt," *Reuters*, last modified December 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-maldives-idINKBN1OG0RH>.

¹¹⁴ J. Lan, "US manipulating Nepal and MCC a geopolitical pact targeting China," *Global Times*, last modified February 15, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252306.shtml>.

growing economy and central location in Asia. For India, the IPS is a complementary initiative to counter the rising Chinese supremacy that is threatening Delhi's security and foreign ambitions.

However, while India's willingness to counterbalance China may appear natural given the two countries' decades of mistrust and border conflicts, its internal and external constraints limit its balancing behaviour. India has abandoned its Cold War policy of non-alignment, but it remains an Asian powerhouse that may be reluctant to play a secondary role to the U.S. Moreover, given the systemic realities, India will not completely declare its alignment for pragmatic reasons. Delhi's greatest leverage over China is India's ambiguity about cooperating with the U.S. In this scenario, a strategic partnership gives India space for pragmatic bilateral alliances with China as well as the U.S. The increasing militarisation and foreign intrusion through IPS in areas concerning Delhi, like South Asia, may push India to reassess its strategy in the coming days. Thus, assuming India will choose to escalate security competition with China or bind itself excessively to the U.S. should not be assumed.

India's position within Western allied systems and the Indo-Pacific region is uncertain as a result of its emphasis on strategic autonomy on issues deemed critical by the West. These evolving relationships show that modern strategic partnerships are not always structured around shared system principles or intended to result in policy coordination, as one might expect if alignment were the goal. India has strategic partnership with China, Russia, and the United States. Of course, the intensity of each varies. As a result, it is not always clear what strategic partnership entails in a given situation and misinterpreting the relationship could be disastrous. However, these collaborations assist countries in institutionalising, regularising, or facilitating dialogue processes, often at multiple levels, making relations more predictable and manageable. In this regard, the IPS provides more opportunities for Washington and Delhi to strengthen their relationship. However, because strategic partnership is most appealing for flexible bilateral relationships, Indo-US ties should not be judged solely on India's adherence to the IPS. The degree to which the United States will offer alternatives to Delhi will be a determining factor in how active a role it can play in establishing and maintaining a regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

As Ukraine and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan have renewed the interests of great powers in those regions, regional powers like India and China want a stronger foothold in their neighbourhoods. Their goal is to create a system that revolves around them, with them at the centre, on their own terms, and for their own security. While the U.S. must be mindful of this, the interests of the region's smaller states must also be considered. Small powers must be understood on their own terms to recognise their priorities, expectations, and policy differences from larger powers. The IPS must consider the interests and perspectives of small powers, given their tendency to use autonomy to devise economic strategies that

protect their sovereignty by limiting their reliance on a single powerful country. It would be fruitful to further analyse the maturing Asian system and systemic implications to small power behaviour within the Indo-Pacific region.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.