



E-ISSN: 2664-603X

P-ISSN: 2664-6021

IJPSG 2025; 7(6): 09-16

www.journalofpoliticalscience.com

Received: 12-04-2025

Accepted: 15-05-2025

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From non-alignment to multi-alignment: India's indo-pacific strategy and the shifting geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i6a.553>

Abstract

This paper explores India's strategic shift from a traditional non-aligned posture to an increasingly multi-aligned foreign policy orientation within the Indo-Pacific theatre, focusing on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. As the Asia-Pacific transitions into a contested geopolitical space shaped by the rise of China, the recalibration of U.S. influence, and the strategic ambitions of middle powers, India has emerged as a pivotal actor redefining the region's security architecture.

Framed through a hybrid theoretical lens combining realism and constructivism, the study critically evaluates India's evolving role in the Indo-Pacific through its engagement in strategic groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and bilateral partnerships with Japan, Australia, ASEAN, and the United States. The paper interrogates India's attempt to balance power while upholding regional inclusivity, democratic norms, and multilateralism. Drawing from official policy documents, elite interviews, multilateral declarations, and think tank outputs, the research traces the implications of India's multi-alignment approach for the stability, hierarchy, and institutional landscape of the broader Asia-Pacific. It argues that India's Indo-Pacific strategy does not merely respond to China's maritime assertiveness, but actively seeks to reshape normative structures of regional order. In doing so, India positions itself not as a counterweight alone but as a co-architect of a pluralistic regional future.

Keywords: Asia-pacific geopolitics, indo-pacific strategy, multi-alignment, regional security architecture, strategic autonomy

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextualizing the Indo-Pacific's Strategic Centrality

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the geopolitical epicenter of the 21st century, shaping the contours of global trade, security dynamics, and normative contestations over regional order. Encompassing a vast maritime space that stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, this region hosts nearly 60% of global GDP and facilitates two-thirds of global energy flows and over 90% of international trade by volume (Brewster, 2021) ^[25]. The Indo-Pacific's strategic significance lies not only in its economic centrality but also in the intensifying geopolitical rivalries that traverse it, particularly between a rising China and a recalibrating United States, as well as the strategic responses of middle powers such as Japan, Australia, and increasingly, India.

The conceptual emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a unified geopolitical construct represents a shift from the earlier Asia-Pacific paradigm. It reflects both the securitization of the maritime commons and the growing salience of the Indian Ocean in global power politics (Scott, 2018) ^[5]. As China continues to expand its military footprint through artificial island-building, coercive diplomacy, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), regional actors have recalibrated their strategic outlooks.

In this shifting milieu, India's maritime geography, demographic weight, and normative commitments place it in a unique position to influence the future of the regional order.

1.2 India's Foreign Policy Evolution: From Nehruvian Non-Alignment to Modi's Assertive Pragmatism

India's foreign policy has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past seven decades, from Jawaharlal Nehru's foundational emphasis on non-alignment and strategic autonomy to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pragmatic and multi-aligned engagement with the Indo-Pacific.

In the immediate post-independence period, India's foreign policy was shaped by the trauma of colonialism, a deep commitment to sovereignty, and a principled refusal to join Cold War military blocs (Ganguly, 2019)^[2]. The doctrine of non-alignment, institutionalized through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), sought to carve out an independent space for India in a bipolar world, emphasizing peaceful coexistence and multilateral cooperation.

However, non-alignment in practice was frequently tested by realpolitik, particularly during the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which saw India lean strategically toward the Soviet Union (Cohen, 2010)^[28]. The end of the Cold War and the 1991 economic liberalization under PV Narasimha Rao marked the beginning of a more flexible and interest-based foreign policy. This shift was institutionalized through the Look East Policy, which sought to deepen ties with Southeast Asia in recognition of India's civilizational links and growing economic interests in the region (Muni, 2014)^[19]. Under Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy has undergone an assertive recalibration. The transition from the Look East to the Act East Policy emphasized not just economic connectivity but also maritime security and defense cooperation. The introduction of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), deeper engagements with ASEAN and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and participation in multilateral naval exercises such as Malabar and Milan reflect a strategic orientation that seeks both balance and influence (Rehman, 2020)^[22]. Modi's vision combines elements of strategic autonomy with a clear inclination toward multi-alignment-cooperating with the United States, Japan, Australia, and France-without being formally allied with any.

1.3 Rationale for Studying India's role in shaping regional order

While much scholarship has been devoted to understanding China's rise and the strategic recalibrations of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific, India's evolving role as a normative, security, and diplomatic actor remains under-theorized (Medcalf, 2020)^[18]. India occupies a pivotal position in the region-not only geographically straddling the Indian Ocean and connecting to Southeast Asia-but also politically, as a democracy committed to a rules-based international order. As such, India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific is crucial to understanding the evolving balance of power, the future of multilateralism, and the redefinition of regional institutions.

India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is marked by a deliberate attempt to shape rather than merely respond to the regional environment. Through initiatives like the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, India articulates a vision of cooperative security that diverges both from Chinese hegemony and U.S.-led exclusivist security frameworks (Pant & Joshi, 2022)^[12].

This middle path-grounded in inclusive regionalism, maritime connectivity, and strategic deterrence-positions India not only as a counterbalance to China but as a co-architect of regional norms.

Moreover, as the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly defined by mini-lateral alignments, economic de-coupling, and soft balancing, India's strategy presents a unique model of multi-alignment that challenges binary great-power competition. This model, which combines issue-based coalitions with

normative leadership, deserves closer scrutiny within the literature on regional order-building and middle power diplomacy.

1.4 Research questions, objectives and theoretical framework overview

This paper explores the central research question: How has India's transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment redefined its strategic role in the Indo-Pacific and influenced regional geopolitics?

To address this, the paper will pursue the following objectives:

- To analyse the historical evolution of India's foreign policy, with a focus on its strategic transition under the Modi government.
- To examine India's institutional engagements and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.
- To assess the extent to which India's multi-alignment strategy has contributed to regional security and norm-building.
- To evaluate the challenges and limitations facing India's Indo-Pacific strategy in a competitive geopolitical environment.

The paper employs a hybrid theoretical framework that draws from both realism and constructivism. Realism is invoked to analyse India's security-driven behaviour, alliance formations, and counterbalancing strategies vis-à-vis China. Constructivism, by contrast, allows for an interpretation of India's Indo-Pacific strategy as a reflection of ideational factors-identity, historical narratives, and normative leadership (Wendt, 1999)^[6]. This dual lens facilitates a holistic understanding of how India reacts to and shapes the regional order.

2. Conceptual Framework: From non-alignment to multi-alignment

2.1 Theoretical Basis: Realism, Constructivism and Strategic Hedging

India's evolving foreign policy posture in the Indo-Pacific cannot be adequately understood through a singular theoretical lens. The complex interplay of material interests, ideational narratives, and strategic calculations necessitates an integrative approach that draws from classical realism, constructivism, and the emerging literature on strategic hedging.

Realism, rooted in the anarchic structure of the international system, posits that states act rationally to maximize their survival, power, and national interest (Mearsheimer, 2001)^[10]. In the Indo-Pacific context, India's maritime modernization, deepening defense partnerships, and participation in alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) illustrate classical realist tendencies.

These moves signal India's intent to balance the rise of China, whose assertive actions in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean challenge the prevailing regional equilibrium (Kapoor, 2022)^[7]. India's military cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, and France exemplifies soft-balancing behavior aimed at constraining China without overt confrontation (Paul, 2005)^[13].

However, realism alone fails to explain the normative and identity-driven aspects of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Constructivism fills this analytical gap by emphasizing the

role of ideational factors such as identity, norms, and historical memory in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1999)^[6]. India's projection of itself as a civilizational power, its invocation of shared Buddhist heritage with Southeast Asia, and its advocacy for a "rules-based, inclusive order" are deeply embedded in a constructivist understanding of regional engagement. Modi's articulation of India's foreign policy often draws upon civilizational idioms-describing India as a "Vishwa Guru" (global teacher) or emphasizing "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family)-which inform diplomatic choices as much as material considerations (Singh, 2021)^[32].

Complementing realism and constructivism is the strategic hedging framework. Hedging refers to strategies employed by states to manage uncertainty and avoid rigid alignment in highly competitive environments (Kuik, 2008)^[9].

India's Indo-Pacific posture exemplifies hedging: It deepens defense cooperation with the United States while maintaining functional ties with Russia and participating in multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. Unlike traditional alignment or bandwagoning, hedging allows India to simultaneously deter threats and preserve strategic flexibility.

Thus, a triangulated theoretical framework-realism for security imperatives, constructivism for ideational narratives, and hedging for diplomatic maneuvering-best captures the complexity of India's multi-aligned Indo-Pacific strategy.

2.2 Defining Multi-Alignment: Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning

The notion of multi-alignment, central to India's foreign policy vocabulary under Prime Minister Modi, reflects a paradigmatic departure from Cold War-era binaries of alignment and non-alignment. Unlike traditional balancing-wherein a state allies with others to counter a hegemon-or bandwagoning where in it aligns with a stronger power to avoid conflict-multi-alignment entails a pragmatic engagement with multiple poles of power without compromising strategic autonomy (Pant & Joshi, 2022)^[12].

India's multi-alignment does not imply equidistance from all major powers; rather, it implies selective cooperation based on issue-specific convergence. For instance, India engages the United States on maritime security, Japan on infrastructure connectivity, France on Indian Ocean governance, and Australia on cybersecurity. This web of overlapping strategic ties allows India to maximize gains while minimizing dependency on any single actor.

Multi-alignment is also operationalized through India's participation in an array of overlapping multilateral and mini-lateral platforms. These include QUAD, IORA, BIMSTEC, IPOI, and SCO-each serving distinct security, economic, or cultural objectives. Such institutional pluralism ensures that India maintains diplomatic optionality in a fluid regional environment. The strategic virtue of multi-alignment lies in its ability to hedge against geopolitical shocks while enabling India to shape regional norms from a position of relative autonomy (Mohan, 2020)^[11]. This policy also represents a conscious effort to avoid strategic entrapment, particularly in an era where U.S.-China competition is sharpening. By not signing any formal alliance, India preserves the capacity to recalibrate its

positions based on shifting alignments.

In this sense, multi-alignment is not ideological but functional-a form of calibrated pragmatism that synthesizes traditional values of strategic autonomy with contemporary global interdependencies.

2.3 India's strategic culture and identity as a civilizational power

India's multi-alignment strategy is deeply influenced by its self-perception as a civilizational state with unique responsibilities toward regional and global order. The articulation of Indian foreign policy under Modi draws from long-standing traditions that view India as more than a Westphalian nation-state. Instead, it sees itself as an inheritor of a civilizational identity grounded in pluralism, peaceful coexistence, and maritime connectivity (Khilnani *et al.*, 2013)^[8].

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is often framed through civilizational linkages with Southeast Asia, particularly Buddhist networks, trade routes, and cultural exchanges. Diplomatic outreach to countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand often highlights shared civilizational histories, emphasizing that India's presence in the region is not recent or imposed, but organic and historical (Singh, 2020)^[33]. This provides India with soft power leverage, allowing it to cultivate trust and legitimacy in ways that materially stronger actors like China cannot.

Additionally, India's strategic culture, marked by a preference for autonomy, self-reliance, and normative leadership, plays a significant role in shaping its Indo-Pacific engagement (Raja Mohan, 2021)^[14]. The Modi government's foreign policy doctrine stresses the "India First" principle but does so in conjunction with regional and global responsibilities. This enables India to pursue an independent course without appearing isolationist or parochial.

India's emphasis on inclusivity and transparency-whether in the context of SAGAR, IPOI, or the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor-further reinforces its normative narrative. By promoting open and rules-based frameworks, India distinguishes its approach from China's state-capital-driven initiatives like the BRI, which are often critiqued for fostering debt dependency and undermining sovereignty (Chandran, 2021)^[26].

Therefore, India's strategic identity as a civilizational power contributes to its ability to frame the Indo-Pacific not merely as a battleground of great powers, but as a space for cooperative development and shared security.

2.4 Positioning India within Asia-Pacific power transitions

India's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy must be understood within the broader context of Asia-Pacific power transitions. The region is witnessing a complex reordering marked by the relative decline of U.S. hegemony, the assertive rise of China, and the increased agency of middle powers such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN countries. In this emerging multipolar configuration, India is no longer a peripheral actor but a critical shaper of outcomes.

India's positioning is distinct from both the hierarchical dominance of the United States and the revisionist assertiveness of China. Unlike Beijing, which seeks to reshape the rules of regional order, India aims to reinforce them-albeit with reforms that reflect its growing status. This

positions India as a “system-supporting reformist” rather than a revisionist power (Saran, 2019) ^[15]. Such positioning allows India to collaborate with status quo powers like the U.S. and Japan while simultaneously engaging reform-oriented institutions such as BRICS and G20.

Moreover, India’s rise is perceived more benignly by its regional neighbours compared to China. Southeast Asian states, wary of Chinese coercion and uncertain about U.S. commitment, often look to India as a stabilizing presence. This perception creates an enabling environment for India’s leadership in norm-building, institution-shaping, and security provisioning, especially in the Indian Ocean and the eastern Indo-Pacific.

India’s active role in shaping new regional discourses-such as “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR), the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), and the International Solar Alliance (ISA)-demonstrates its intent to be a normative anchor amidst geopolitical flux. In this regard, India’s multi-alignment is not just a foreign policy tactic but a strategic recalibration that seeks to anchor regional stability through pluralism, resilience, and inclusivity.

3. Modi’s Indo-Pacific Vision: Doctrinal shift and diplomatic practice

3.1 From Look East to Act East

India’s engagement with East and Southeast Asia underwent a pivotal transformation with the evolution of its “Look East Policy” (LEP) into the more comprehensive “Act East Policy” (AEP) under the Modi administration. Originally conceptualized in the early 1990s in response to post-Cold War global realignments and economic liberalization, the LEP aimed at cultivating political, economic, and cultural links with Southeast Asia.

However, it was often critiqued for lacking strategic coherence and under-emphasizing defense and maritime dimensions (Muni, 2014) ^[19].

The Modi government’s 2014 shift to the AEP marked a doctrinal maturation in India’s regional vision. AEP broadened India’s strategic outreach beyond ASEAN to include East Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands, with a significantly sharper focus on defense diplomacy, maritime security, and multilateral institutionalism (Pant & Joshi, 2020) ^[20]. The AEP encapsulated the recognition that economic engagement must be complemented by strategic influence if India is to play a decisive role in the Indo-Pacific.

Under AEP, India institutionalized security dialogues with Japan and Australia, elevated its defense partnership with the United States through foundational agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA), and expanded the scope of joint military exercises. These developments underscored India’s willingness to recalibrate its traditionally cautious strategic posture and embed itself more firmly in the architecture of regional security.

3.2 The SAGAR Doctrine and Maritime Reimagination

A cornerstone of Modi’s Indo-Pacific strategy is the SAGAR doctrine-Security and Growth for All in the Region-articulated in 2015 during his visit to the Indian Ocean island states. SAGAR represents a shift in India’s regional maritime outlook from a primarily defensive paradigm to a proactive and cooperative framework aimed at securing the global commons (Modi, 2015). The doctrine

emphasizes five pillars: (1) enhancing maritime security, (2) building economic and infrastructural partnerships, (3) capacity building, (4) sustainable development, and (5) disaster risk reduction.

SAGAR is underpinned by India’s aspiration to serve as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Brewster, 2021) ^[25]. It frames the Indo-Pacific not as a theatre of contestation but as a shared strategic space wherein India can lead cooperative security initiatives without abandoning strategic autonomy. This outlook informs India’s increasing involvement in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), naval capacity-building in island nations, and naval diplomacy via port visits and joint patrols.

SAGAR also contributes to India’s soft power diplomacy by portraying it as a responsible and benign maritime actor-contrasted implicitly with China’s coercive behavior in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

This allows India to frame its Indo-Pacific role as normatively grounded, cooperative, and non-threatening, resonating with regional stakeholders such as ASEAN, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Maldives (Chaudhury, 2022) ^[27].

3.3 The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

In 2019, Modi launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, providing an institutional framework to operationalize India’s Indo-Pacific vision. Unlike the U.S.-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which carries strong strategic overtones vis-à-vis China, the IPOI seeks to build functional cooperation across seven thematic pillars: maritime security, maritime ecology, disaster risk reduction, capacity building, connectivity, the blue economy, and science and technology (Saran, 2020) ^[23].

IPOI is deliberately non-aligned with any singular geopolitical bloc and functions as an open, inclusive platform that invites voluntary collaboration. The initiative’s structure reflects India’s preference for issue-based, modular multilateralism. Countries such as Australia, France, Japan, and Indonesia have emerged as key partners, each leading specific pillars, furthering the idea of distributed regional leadership (Pant & Joshi, 2022) ^[12].

The IPOI aligns with India’s long-standing commitment to multilateralism while showcasing its capacity to shape regional governance frameworks.

It also allows India to promote inclusive economic and environmental sustainability narratives in the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing its identity as a civilizational actor offering alternatives to China’s state-capitalist infrastructure diplomacy.

3.4 India’s Normative Reframing of the Indo-Pacific

India’s conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific diverges from other major powers in key ways. While the United States and Japan often portray the Indo-Pacific through the lens of strategic containment of China, India’s articulation emphasizes inclusivity, multipolarity, and regional resilience (Medcalf, 2020) ^[18]. Modi’s speech at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue encapsulated India’s desire for a “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific,” rooted in respect for sovereignty, international law (especially UNCLOS), and freedom of navigation (MEA, 2018).

This reframing reflects India’s balancing act: aligning with democratic coalitions without appearing exclusionary or

provoking direct confrontation. It also enables India to maintain open channels of dialogue with China, as seen in forums such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral mechanism.

India's norm-framing extends beyond security to include climate diplomacy (through the International Solar Alliance), infrastructure governance (via the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure), and connectivity standards (through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor in partnership with Japan). These initiatives underscore India's commitment to shaping a rules-based regional order beyond the traditional security sphere.

3.5 Expanding Diplomatic Architecture: From QUAD to Mini-Laterals

India's Indo-Pacific vision is further operationalized through its participation in a growing array of strategic dialogues and mini-lateral formats. Chief among them is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)-revived in 2017-which now includes regular foreign ministers' meetings, leader-level summits, and joint naval exercises. India's role in QUAD marks a decisive break from its earlier hesitations and demonstrates its readiness to contribute to regional security provisioning (Rehman, 2020) ^[22].

India has also expanded trilateral formats such as India-France-Australia and India-Indonesia-Australia, aimed at enhancing maritime domain awareness and cyber coordination. These flexible formats reinforce India's commitment to cooperative security without formal alliances, reflecting the logic of strategic hedging.

The strategic logic behind this architecture lies in redundancy and modularity. India seeks not to create a singular bloc but to build a dense network of overlapping coalitions, each tailored to specific issue areas-from maritime security and critical technologies to supply chain resilience and energy transition (Chandran, 2021) ^[26]. This reinforces India's normative vision of a polycentric Indo-Pacific led not by one hegemon, but by multiple rule-shaping stakeholders.

3.6 Diplomacy through Infrastructure: India's Economic Outreach

While China's BRI has dominated regional infrastructure discourse, India has increasingly positioned itself as a provider of transparent and demand-driven infrastructure development, particularly through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) in partnership with Japan. The AAGC aims to enhance digital connectivity, institutional capacity-building, and sustainable development across the Indian Ocean littoral and East Africa (Rajan, 2019) ^[21].

India has also signed infrastructure cooperation pacts with ASEAN, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, extending its economic diplomacy as a tool for geopolitical influence. These initiatives are not intended to compete head-on with the BRI in scale, but rather to offer an alternative model grounded in local ownership, ecological balance, and transparency.

India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)-led by the United States-further highlights its commitment to shaping regional trade norms without committing to comprehensive trade liberalization, thereby preserving domestic economic priorities while engaging regionally.

India's Indo-Pacific vision under Narendra Modi reflects a strategic reorientation toward proactive maritime engagement, multilateral leadership, and normative diplomacy. The doctrinal transformation from Look East to Act East, the institutional innovations like SAGAR and IPOI, and the active participation in platforms like QUAD and IPEF illustrate a multi-layered strategy that balances principled autonomy with pragmatic alignment.

India's vision stands apart for its emphasis on inclusivity, multipolarity and development-oriented security. By reframing the Indo-Pacific as a space for cooperation rather than zero-sum rivalry, India seeks to provide a compelling alternative to China's coercive diplomacy and the West's alliance-centric models. In doing so, it aspires to not merely participate in the Indo-Pacific order-but to co-author it.

4. India's Redefining Role in Regional Security

4.1 Evolving Security Posture in the Indo-Pacific

India's transformation from a continental, largely reactive security actor to a proactive maritime power has been central to its evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. Historically confined to managing land-border conflicts with Pakistan and China, India has expanded its strategic horizon to the broader maritime domain in response to shifting regional dynamics. The increasing militarization of the Indo-Pacific-driven by China's assertiveness, U.S. retrenchment, and power diffusion-has accelerated India's role as a key security actor (Brewster, 2021) ^[25].

This evolution is visible in India's assertive naval posturing, regional security dialogues, and partnerships that project influence across the Indian Ocean and into the Western Pacific. No longer content with symbolic presence, India now actively seeks to shape the region's security architecture through partnerships, capacity-building, and norm promotion (Pant & Joshi, 2022) ^[12]. Its security strategy reflects a deliberate move from strategic ambiguity to strategic assertion, aimed at deterring threats, reassuring partners, and bolstering its normative appeal.

4.2 Military Modernization and Naval Expansion

At the core of India's regional security ambitions lies its sustained investment in military modernization, particularly its naval capabilities. The Indian Navy is now central to India's geopolitical outreach, transitioning from a primarily coastal defense force to a blue-water navy capable of power projection across the Indo-Pacific (Holmes, 2019) ^[29]. With over 130 ships and ambitious shipbuilding programs-including nuclear-powered submarines, aircraft carriers like INS Vikrant, and advanced destroyers-India is laying the hardware foundations for long-term maritime influence (Prakash, 2023) ^[31].

Key modernization programs such as Project-75I, focused on building indigenous stealth submarines, and partnerships with France and Russia for advanced naval platforms reflect India's aspiration for technological self-reliance and deterrent credibility. The Indian Navy's increasing integration of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), maritime domain awareness platforms, and space-based surveillance systems further enhances its real-time operational capabilities (Singh, 2021) ^[32].

These developments are not merely capacity-enhancing-they are deeply strategic. Naval modernization underpins India's deterrence posture against China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which has rapidly expanded its

operations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India's establishment of forward-operating bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and joint maritime centers with France and the U.S. (e.g., in Reunion and Diego Garcia) serve as force multipliers for regional power projection (Brewster, 2020) ^[24].

4.3 Maritime domain awareness and intelligence networks

India's investment in maritime domain awareness (MDA) is a critical component of its regional security strategy. Recognizing that strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific often plays out in the "gray zone" of unregulated maritime activity-illegal fishing, maritime militias, and undersea infrastructure threats-India has prioritized real-time surveillance, intelligence-sharing, and fusion center development (Holmes, 2019) ^[29].

The establishment of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram in 2018 has enabled India to coordinate data-sharing among over 20 partner countries.

Through such initiatives, India positions itself as a provider of public maritime goods, thereby increasing its relevance and acceptability as a security partner among Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian nations (Saran, 2020) ^[23].

Furthermore, bilateral agreements like LEMOA (with the U.S.), COMCASA (on communications security), and intelligence-sharing with Australia, France, and Japan have helped India plug into existing multilateral security architectures, enhancing interoperability and operational depth.

4.4 India's role in addressing non-traditional security challenges

India's redefinition of regional security is not confined to traditional state-centric threats. It has expanded its security agenda to include non-traditional threats such as cyber threats, piracy, climate change, natural disasters, and pandemics-all of which disproportionately affect littoral and small island nations in the Indo-Pacific (Chaudhury, 2022) ^[27]. India has emerged as a leader in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, with notable deployments during the 2004 tsunami, the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Naval vessels have been deployed to deliver oxygen, food, and medical supplies to countries like Maldives, Mauritius, and Indonesia under "Operation Samudra Setu" and "Mission Sagar" (Singh, 2020) ^[33]. These efforts build India's image as a benevolent power, contributing to regional resilience and soft security leadership.

India is also leading on climate and environmental security, particularly through the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). These initiatives link energy security and climate adaptation to geopolitical stability, enabling India to influence regional narratives on sustainable development.

In cybersecurity, India has initiated dialogues with ASEAN, Australia, and the United States to combat hybrid threats and critical infrastructure sabotage. Such engagements reflect a broader conception of security, rooted in the idea of comprehensive regional stability.

4.5 Strategic deterrence through defense diplomacy

India's use of Defense diplomacy has grown significantly in

the Indo-Pacific, reflecting a deliberate shift toward capability-sharing, training, and regional balancing. India conducts over 40 joint military exercises annually, with prominent engagements including the Malabar Exercise (with the U.S., Japan, and Australia), AUSINDEX (with Australia), La Pérouse (with France), and MILAN, which involves multiple Southeast Asian navies (Pant & Joshi, 2020) ^[20].

These exercises not only enhance interoperability but signal India's growing reliability as a security partner. Furthermore, India has increased defense exports and capacity-building assistance, particularly to Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam and the Philippines.

India's offer of Defense lines of credit, submarine training, and patrol boat transfers to these countries positions it as a credible alternative to China and an enabler of regional self-reliance (Chandran, 2021) ^[26].

India's defense engagement strategy complements its diplomatic goals: it allows for counterbalancing without confrontation, facilitates norm diffusion (e.g., freedom of navigation), and reinforces multilateral coalitions against coercive behavior in contested maritime zones.

4.6 Balancing Domestic Constraints and Strategic Ambitions

Despite its ambitions, India's ability to act as a regional security provider faces several domestic constraints. Budgetary limitations, slow bureaucratic reforms, and dependence on foreign defense technologies have often hindered timely project completion and force readiness (Cohen, 2010) ^[28].

India's defense budget-though rising in absolute terms-remains modest relative to its regional aspirations and faces stiff competition from welfare spending and developmental priorities (Holmes, 2019) ^[29].

Furthermore, India's traditionally cautious diplomatic culture and institutional inertia slow down doctrinal innovation. While Modi has introduced a more assertive foreign policy narrative, operationalizing this vision across multiple ministries and commands remains a challenge (Pant & Joshi, 2022) ^[12]. There also exists a civil-military divide in strategic planning, which impedes seamless coordination between policy and practice.

However, India has undertaken notable reforms, including the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) position, the Agnipath recruitment scheme, and policy changes to encourage private sector participation in defense manufacturing. These efforts, if sustained, could bridge the gap between ambition and capability over the medium term.

4.7 India's impact on multilateral security architectures

India's expanding role in regional security is also visible in its influence over multilateral security architectures. As a founding member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and participant in the East Asia Summit, India uses these platforms to advocate for inclusive, rules-based maritime governance. Unlike China's preference for bilateralism, India emphasizes multilateral rule-making to build collective resistance to coercion (Saran, 2020) ^[23].

India's leadership in forums such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) further signals its intent to shape naval norms and operational doctrines. IONS promotes coordinated responses to piracy, illegal trafficking, and maritime terrorism-threats that transcend national

boundaries and require cooperative frameworks.

By leading on non-contentious issues—such as capacity-building, climate resilience, and digital connectivity—India enhances its appeal among middle and small powers, contributing to a layered security architecture that is both adaptive and inclusive.

Though challenges remain, India's ability to align domestic reforms with regional expectations will determine the durability of its security role in the Indo-Pacific. By pursuing a nuanced and multidimensional security strategy—one that integrates hard power, soft power, and institutional leadership—India aspires not just to defend its interests, but to co-create the rules that will govern the Asia-Pacific order.

5. Conclusion and Future Scope

5.1 Revisiting the Strategic Shift: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

India's Indo-Pacific strategy under the Modi administration represents a profound reorientation of its post-independence foreign policy ethos. Moving beyond the moral idealism and strategic abstention of Nehruvian non-alignment, India has embraced a form of multi-alignment that is both pragmatic and principled. This approach is not a rejection of strategic autonomy, but rather its contemporary redefinition—a proactive framework that enables India to engage multiple powers without being constrained by rigid alliances.

The shift is driven by the recognition that the Indo-Pacific is no longer a passive strategic periphery but a primary theatre of geopolitical contestation and economic dynamism. China's assertive maritime expansion, the recalibration of U.S. presence, and the regional aspirations of middle powers have made this space too consequential for India to remain reactive or neutral. The Modi government's response has been to assert India's agency through doctrinal innovation (e.g., SAGAR, IPOI), military modernization, multilateral diplomacy, and normative entrepreneurship.

Multi-Alignment as Strategic Practice: India's foreign policy no longer oscillates between non-alignment and alliance but embraces multi-vector engagement based on issue-based convergence. This allows India to deepen ties with democratic partners (e.g., QUAD, France, ASEAN) while maintaining open channels with Russia, China, and multilateral groups like BRICS and SCO.

- **Maritime Centrality and Civilizational Diplomacy:** India's strategic imagination has shifted toward the maritime domain, with the Indian Ocean and Eastern Indo-Pacific now forming the core of its security calculus. This transition is accompanied by the revival of civilizational narratives and cultural diplomacy—tools that lend legitimacy and depth to its Indo-Pacific outreach.
- **Normative agency in regional order-building:** India's foreign policy under Modi is not simply reactive but increasingly constructive. Through initiatives like the IPOI, ISA, and CDRI, India is attempting to shape the rules, values, and governance structures of the regional order—offering a pluralistic alternative to both American hegemony and Chinese centrality.
- **Security Provider with Constraints:** While India has expanded its military capabilities and defense diplomacy footprint, structural limitations—including budgetary constraints, technological dependencies, and institutional inertia—continue to temper its ambitions.

These gaps highlight the asymmetry between strategic aspiration and implementation.

- **Middle power diplomacy in a fragmented world:** India's Indo-Pacific strategy serves as a case study in how a rising but constrained middle power navigates a world marked by power diffusion, strategic ambiguity, and global volatility. India's layered diplomacy—simultaneously bilateral, mini-lateral, and multilateral—is emblematic of post-hegemonic international politics.

5.2 India's Indo-Pacific strategy and the future of regional order

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is not merely a reaction to the China challenge. Rather, it reflects a broader effort to co-author a new regional order rooted in inclusivity, transparency, and cooperative security. By advancing a model of networked, non-hierarchical multilateralism, India challenges the dominant strategic binaries—alliances vs. non-alignment, containment vs. bandwagoning—and instead proposes a multipolar, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

However, the success of this vision depends on India's ability to institutionalize strategic clarity, harmonize domestic capacities with external expectations, and maintain diplomatic coherence across divergent forums. As the region becomes increasingly fragmented, India's role as a bridge-builder among liberal democracies, developing economies, and neutral actors will be tested.

India's future influence will also hinge on its ability to sustain normative leadership—not just through rhetoric, but through credible performance in climate security, digital governance, equitable development, and regional resilience. In this sense, India must move from being a balancer of power to a stabilizer of norms.

5.4 Future Research Trajectories

This research opens up several avenues for further investigation:

1. Comparative multi-alignment studies: How does India's strategy compare with ASEAN, Japan, or South Korea's hedging behavior?
2. Empirical testing: To what extent has India's normative discourse translated into material outcomes or institutional influence in the Indo-Pacific?

By situating India's strategy within these broader questions, scholars can refine theories of middle power diplomacy, emerging regionalism, and the evolving architecture of post-Western global order.

India stands at a geopolitical inflection point. As the Indo-Pacific becomes the crucible of global transformation, India's strategic choices will shape not only its national trajectory but the contours of a new regional equilibrium. The transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment is more than a semantic shift—it is a civilizational recalibration of India's place in the world.

India's challenge now is to convert strategic intent into institutional credibility, to match its civilizational voice with structural influence, and to lead not just as a balancer of power, but as an architect of pluralistic order. If it succeeds, India will not just be in the Indo-Pacific—it will help define it.

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 34. "Multi-alignment" here is used to describe India's practice of simultaneous strategic partnerships across competing poles of power without rigid ideological commitment.
 35. *India's Indo-Pacific strategy is often analyzed through a U.S.-China binary; this paper attempts a re-centering of India as a norm-producing actor*.
 36. *Soft balancing refers to the use of non-military tools like institutions, economic instruments, and diplomatic networks to constrain a hegemon's power (Paul, 2005)*.
 37. *Strategic hedging is distinct from neutrality; it involves both cooperation and deterrence aimed at maximizing autonomy under uncertainty (Kuik, 2008)*.
 38. *IPOI's non-treaty, pillar-based structure allows India to lead without binding legal obligations, consistent with its strategic autonomy doctrine*.
 39. *QUAD critics argue it lacks institutional depth; India's participation reflects a balance between symbolic alignment and operational caution*.
 40. *Civilizational diplomacy refers to India's invocation of shared heritage to enhance legitimacy in Southeast Asia, beyond traditional material inducements*.
 41. *India's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) without full trade liberalization signals its preference for issue-based economic multilateralism*.
 42. *Future studies could compare India's multi-alignment with ASEAN's "omni-enmeshment" strategy to evaluate models of middle power regionalism*.